Owari no Chronicle Volume1

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AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉

かつて世界は、平行して存在する10個の異世界と戦闘を繰り広げていた。概念戦争と呼ばれるその戦争に勝利してから60年。全てが隠蔽され、一般の人々に知られることなく時が過ぎた現在……。

高校生の佐山御言は祖父の死後、突然巨大企業IAIより呼び出しを受ける。そして、この世界がマイナス概念の加速により滅びの方向へ進みつつあること。それを防ぐには、各異世界の生き残り達と交渉し、彼らが持つ10個の概念を解放しなければならないことを伝えられる。

かくして、佐山は多くの遺恨を残した概念戦争の戦後処理として、最後の闘いに巻き込まれていくが……。

川上稔が放つ新リーズ、遂に始動！

か-5-16

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉

川上稔

電撃文庫
¥
670

か-5-16

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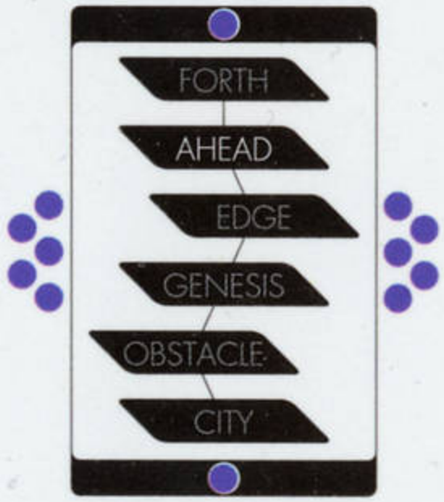
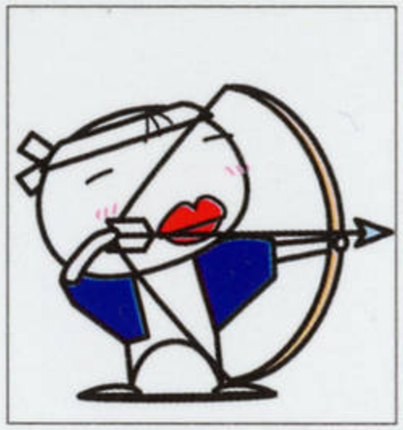


The 1st.AHEAD



川上 稔（かわかみ みのる）

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。新シリーズを快調に執筆中。すでに3巻目を書いているらしい。そのあまりのスピードに担当もびっくり。その他、内緒の企画もいくつか進行中。だ、だいじょうぶっスか？

【電撃文庫作品】

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AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉

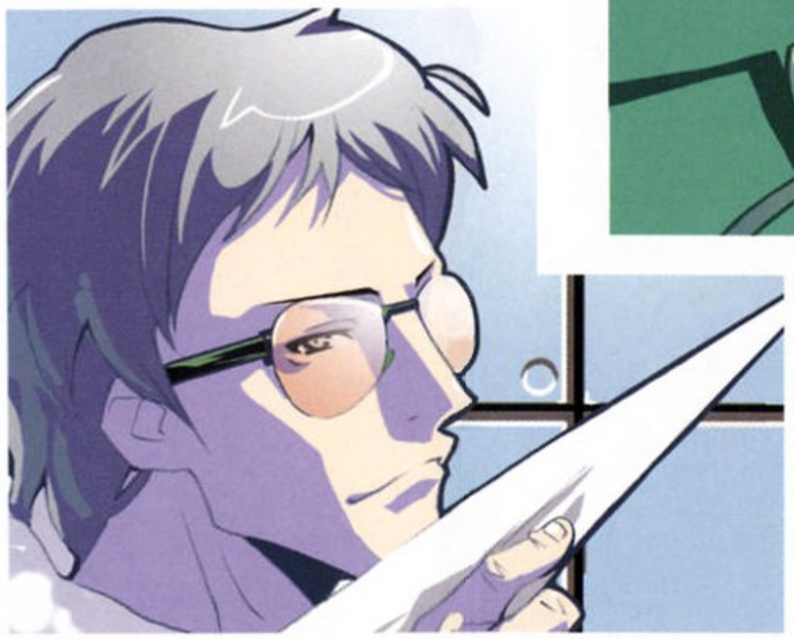
イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち。「何か最近歯が痛くなりました。そういうことでお願いします」……そういうことって、何？

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.01



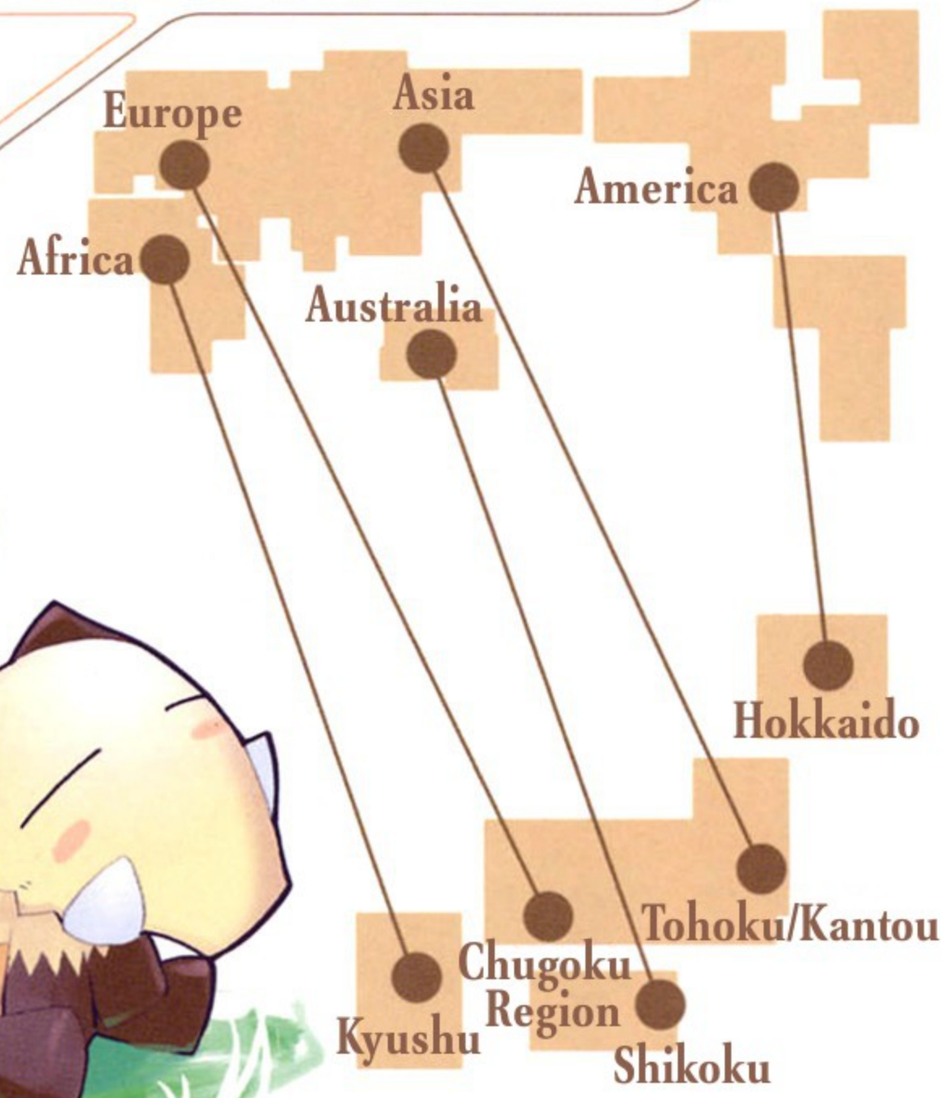
CHARACTER

02

- Name: Shinjou·???
- Class: UCAT Special Division Member
- Faith: ???

- Name: Sayama·Mikoto
- Class: Council Vice-President
- Faith: Aspiring Villain

04



Name: Baku

The interaction worked as seen above, and facilities to stimulate the ley lines were constructed across Japan before World War II. Even some special experts from Germany were involved as advisors. The strategy was carried out by the Izumo Aviation Institute's "National Defense Department". That organization was the predecessor to the modern Japanese UCAT.

• Divine States-World Interaction Theory •

Before World War II,
the Izumo Aviation Institute (currently known as IAI)
enacted the ley line modification strategy.
It said "Japan has the same geographical features as the world,
so it is the center of the world's ley lines.
Therefore, by stimulating and manipulating Japan's ley lines and by
connecting them closely to the world's ley lines, the direction the world
is headed in can be discovered and its future trends can be influenced."
This line of thinking began from viewing Japan as the entirety of the world.

Name: Ooki-sensei

February 14, 2005
First Public Relations Club

SPORTS TAKAAKITA

SPOTAKA

Kazami flew! She flew up to the roof, broke it, and ran off!

A Comment

"That was a splendid drop kick. The mount punch afterwards was not the work of an amateur. I think it was finished quite well. She must have practiced it a lot." (Professional Wrestling Club)

BRAWL!
Kazami Chisato said the following to our reporter: "The important thing is to focus on the axis of your body. Also, don't take your eyes off your prey. Next time will be the spring general student meeting. I should have a new move by then, so make sure to cheer me on!"
Izumu Kaku (Wife Intrusion 5m 12s) Gonzales Itou
Sayama Mikoto (Fireworks 17m 31s) Michael Naito
Kazami Chisato (Forfeit -) Rusher Matsu

3 MINUTES, 7 SECONDS INTO THE SPEECH

It was so sudden. Just as Presidential Candidate Izumo responded to heckling about his female roommate by proudly announcing his love, the wife in question gave a cruel rebuttal!

#287 Fountain of Knowledge HEALTH SPECIAL

Today's piece of knowledge overflowing with health concerns the emblem of our Takaakita Academy. People often wonder about the strange rice plant pattern and the halo sun, but the truth is no one really knows. It is also popular with the students.

"What is Takaakita? We aren't some new type of rice."

...P-popular?

"Now, time for an open match" MISUNDERSTOOD STUDENT COUNCIL COMMENTS

New Student Council President - Izumo Kaku (Entering 3rd year)

"A great man in my head once said, "Milk every morning makes the tits grow nice and big." An excellent saying. I should do some great things every morning, too. For example, I could go like this and...wait...h-how would it go!?" (The meaning of that last bit is unknown.)

New Student Council Vice President - Sayama Mikoto (Entering 2nd year)

"Despite the idiot speaking nonsense above me, has everyone managed to get by all right? The student council has gathered some people a normal person like me cannot quite keep up with, but I am remaining calm and hoping for an impeachment."

New Student Council Treasurer - Kazami Chisato (Entering 3rd year)

"I'm sure two idiots have said some strange things above, but it is the treasurer's job to strangle them and ensure their eccentricities and harm do not leave the student council. I will do my best for the sake of peace."

New Student Council Advisor - Reel Ooki (Teacher)

"Three problem children have said various things above, but I will do my best. After all, this year's objective is, 'start trying next year'! I will do my best to keep anyone from calling me an idiot!"

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

1
【上】

—Gentlemen.
Let's go at ease.
In order to know the end first.

AHEAD

終わりのクロニクル 1-上
プロット表

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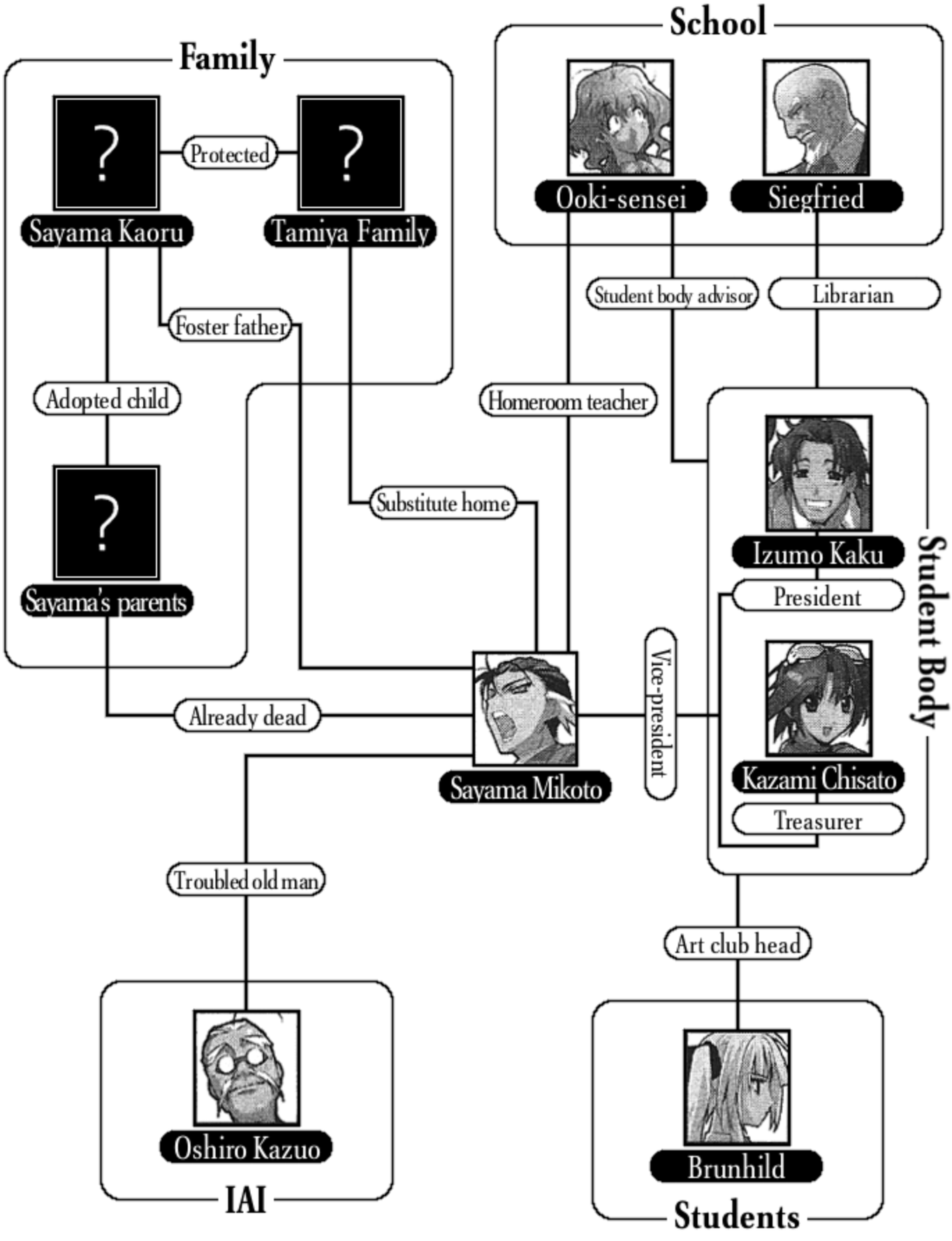
ボクが彼と初めて逢ったときのことを忘れずに

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

01

·Current relation chart centered around Sayama·



Prologue: Saint's Song

Prologue

“Saint’s Song”

He called out
She sang
Those words continued until the sound completely vanished

He called out.

She sang.

Those words continued until the sound completely vanished.

It was night.

An area of land emitted light below the darkness of the heavens.

It was a city.

In the center of this city, a large white structure sat where the railways gathered.

This train station building stood eight stories tall.

The second story of the north entrance was made into a large terrace with the words "Tachikawa Station North Entrance" displayed in blue.

The clock on the opposite building read 10 PM. The station building's workers had left for the night, but the last train was still a long way off.

However, no one could be seen in the station, on the station terrace, or on the traffic circle in front of the station.

Below a row of green-leaved trees along near the traffic circle was a line of cars. However, not one of these cars was moving. No busses were running either. The train tracks stretching away from the station had no trains running on them.

The entire area was deserted.

A single noise could be heard in that unmoving world.

It came from above.

It was on the eastern side of the upper levels of the station building. Specifically, a tenant window on the seventh floor. Someone was beating on the window from within.

The silhouette visible through the glass was feminine.

She suddenly stopped moving. Then she left the window and ran in the opposite direction.

The very next moment, a new shadow appeared in the window.

Taking the place of the feminine figure was a large silhouette over two meters tall.

It slammed into the window.

The window bent, bulged out, and then broke when it could no longer withstand the force.

A single shattering sound could be heard. It was followed by the sound of shards spraying out into the air.

Three silver arcs shot out the window as if trying to scratch at those glimmers scattering through the air.

They were claws.

Those arcs of light scratched at the flying glass shards with compact movements.

The giant shadow the claws belonged to turned around as it swung its arm. In the space of half a breath,

the shadow disappeared from the window frame. It was pursuing the fleeing feminine figure.

The outside wind blew into the building as if following after the shadow.

After hours, the train station building's escalator landing only had the bare minimum of illumination. A single figure was stopped there gasping for breath. The emergency lighting showed a girl with disheveled hair and wearing a blazer.

The girl held a large black case and the floor number printed yellow on the floor below her feet read "3". If she turned around and continued down another floor, she would reach the second floor.

"I can get to the terrace from there," she said before coughing. She coughed twice and then thrice before raising a trembling voice. "You have to be kidding me… What is this? What is attacking me?"

The dry cough continued after she spoke and it only further dried the air in her lungs. She bent over and her lips formed voiceless words:

I'm sorry. I was an idiot to not come home right away.

She strengthened her grip embracing the black case in her arms.

A flute symbol could be seen next to the maker's logo on the top of the case. A single piece of paper was balled up in the side pocket. She caught sight of the white of the ribbon attached to the paper.

"All my bad luck started here. Three years of bad luck. And now when I lose my nerve and come to hide in my usual spot, my security guard grandfather is gone… And then a strange shadow starts swinging blades around…"

Before that had happened, she had thought she had heard some kind of odd voice. The voice had reverberated in her head. That had woken her up.

She tilted her head while wondering what that had been, but she quickly swung her head back into place.

…I need to run away before that shadow catches up.

She breathed out and a noise reverberated from overhead as if in response.

Running footsteps that sounded like stakes being driven into the ground were approaching from directly upwards.

"…!"

She grabbed the strap to her case and moved gracefully toward the escalator.

She chose to continue down. Down, down, down. Down to the second floor. Every additional element of the situation only told her to hurry.

She ran down the aluminum steps. Solid sounds rang out every time her leather shoes slammed down on the steps.

She heard footsteps from above overlapping with her own rushed footsteps.

But it did not all come to an end there.

"…Wind?"

It came from outside. It came from the building's northern wall, the same wall as the window she had knocked on before.

A single sound approached that wall from outside. It was a deep, long, wide, reverberating, and low sound.

What? she thought and braced herself. In the next moment, the building shook as if it had been struck from the side.

"…!?"

The noise was tremendous. Just like the sound of a passing airplane, this explosion of air robbed her of all her bodily senses.

Her entire body trembled and the hair all across her body stood on end. Her running feet were stopped in an instant.

The great roar she could feel in the core of her body passed at high speed from the east to the west. The sound of wind that followed behind it also shot by to the west and into the western sky.

Silence followed.

She all of a sudden realized she had been released from the noise.

She shook her body once and took a step. Her legs trembled and her body filled with strength. Her will begged her to move forward.

I need to go, she realized. She took a deep breath, looked down, and saw the escalator ended after only a few more steps.

Hurry, her feelings shouted, but the information provided by her vision brought those feelings to a halt.

A slight darkness covered her vision. It was the shadow of the escalator landing above.

The footsteps from above disappeared within her ears.

…Something is…!

Before she could think "coming", she acted. She strengthened her grip on the strap in her hand.

"Sorry."

She swung the case upwards in a motion similar to a golf swing.

Her vision turned upwards. The black shadow fell down into the upwards path of her strike.

She hit.

The corner of the case struck the shadow right in the flank.

It was knocked away. The case at the end of the strap and the case's contents weighed over five kilograms. The resentment behind that weight came both from this chase and from her three years with the instrument inside.

With the sound of flesh being struck, the shadow doubled over. The case broke and the instrument inside scattered about.

The shadow's body was knocked to the right.

But the cold light in the shadow's hand was still swung down toward her.

And then she finally realized something. What she had thought were blades were actually giant claws. And the owner of these claws was a large beast.

As her eyes focused on those claws, the corner of her vision showed that shadow of a giant beast take the same stance as a human.

Everything after that happened in a single instant.

The claws swinging down from above smashed the side frame of the escalator, but the beast could not stop itself from collapsing. Its giant body fell down toward the neighboring escalator.

"…!"

The beast let out a roar. The sound of an impact followed.

But she did not hear that cry of protest. She only heard the sound of the instrument scattering across the floor.

Sorry, she apologized in her heart.

In the next instant, she fully lost her balance due to her previous attempt to evade. She fell down atop the escalator.

She now gave her physical pain precedence over her emotional pain. Her momentum spun her around backwards.

Her back struck the corner of one of the steps and she had the breath knocked out of her. Even her skirt was in complete disarray.

But she grabbed the handrail and forced herself back onto her feet.

From below, she heard the voice of the beast. The voice was filled with anger and rage and did not seem to know what had happened.

She ignored it.

She began to run, now with nothing in her hands. She ran down the escalator and to the second floor.

On the left and right of this barely-lit floor were lines of boutiques. Every store was covered by a shutter. The girl would occasionally see this same sight when being led by a security guard. Today, she ran by it all.

She was focused on the glass door at the end of the floor. That door alone had no shutter covering it.

If she left that door, she would reach the large entrance to Tachikawa Station that cut across north to south on the second floor of the station building.

She tried her best to open or unlock the door. She then slammed her shoulder into the glass door.

It was a dull impact. However, that pain slowly pushed her through to the other side.

The door to that after-hours station building opened.

"What…is going on?" said the girl as she tumbled out into the fresh air.

Her knees landed on the tiles of the entrance floor.

She was surrounded by a vast, deserted space. The Tachikawa Station entrance was about 15 meters wide.

She suddenly felt something on the back of her right hand. It was a soft, damp sensation.

She looked down to find a cat. The brown cat still had some youth remaining.

But the presence of this cat sent a chill running down her spine. She could see no sign of anyone else in the area. She had seen no one but the shadow that had attacked her. The traffic circle she had earlier seen from above had also been deserted.

Thinking the cat might be the same as her, she picked it up. In the instant their gazes met, the cat had been looking up at her, but its eyes narrowed when she lifted it from the ground. And that was why she decided to take it with her.

She stood up.

"I need to get to the northern terrace," she muttered as she looked to her right where the northern end of the entrance led to the terrace.

And that was when a wind accompanied by a metallic noise dropped down onto the traffic circle beyond the terrace.

She looked up and saw the wind surrounding on the traffic circle had a giant gray form.

It was a giant gray humanoid machine.

For the upper body to stick up above the terrace, it had to be at least 10 meters tall. It was a fully gray-…

"Robot? No…Armor?"

As if to answer the girl's question, the giant silhouette stood up. And then it turned to face her.

The gray giant had a single blue light where its eyes would be.

The girl felt like she was being watched.

Her pulse seemed to freeze and she cowered down. She could not breathe and she realized for the first time that she was frightened.

Meanwhile, the cat wriggled in her trembling arms. It seemed to be complaining that her arms were wrapped to tightly around it.

The cat let out a sweet meow while showing no concern for the armor's gaze.

That out-of-place noise made a bitter laugh escape the girl's lips.

She realized fear meant nothing to the cat. The cat did not understand anything that was happening and therefore was not afraid.

"…"

She let out a shallow breath. And as if that was a sign, strength returned to her body.

I can do this. I can do this, she thought twice.

To the left, there was a staircase leading down between the entrance and the terrace. Given that giant's size, it would have difficulty making its way below the terrace.

She was 15 meters from the staircase. It would not even take her three seconds if she used all her strength.

And so she immediately decided to run. She went all out from the very first step. However…

"Ah."

Her right foot seemed to catch on something and she tripped.

"Wh-what!?"

Her body jumped more out of surprise than pain. She looked down and saw her leather shoe lying in front of her right foot. It had torn from the opening to the side sole. It must have ripped when she had fallen on the escalator earlier.

Oh, no.

When she tried to stand up, she felt pain in her right ankle.

She could not stand. Strength left her knee and she collapsed to the cold tile floor.

"Kh," she groaned while looking behind her from the floor.

The giant was holding its right arm toward her from beyond the terrace. Something like a tube was attached to the outer edge of the arm. It was obviously a cannon.

It was targeting her.

"Ah," leaked out another noise.

She felt more noise coming, but swallowed it all down. She let out tears instead.

And then she noticed the cat was standing next to her collapsed hips.

As if worried about her, the cat was rubbing its head up against her leg.

The girl reflexively picked the cat up once more. She then looked up and glared at the giant.

In the next instant, some power exploded out of the giant's right arm toward her.

She first saw flames. In the following instant, white smoke raced through the air.

A high-pitched sound of something slicing through the wind raced toward her.

A shell had been fired.

It was coming. It was dangerous. She tried to stand up, but her ankle filled with pain and her hips collapsed back down.

Nevertheless, she tried to stand up once more.

"…!"

The noise that leaked from her throat was not a scream ; it was anger at herself.

The power this enemy had fired arrived in an instant.

And it exploded.

She opened her eyes.

She noticed the wind blowing around her and also that the cat was still in her arms.

"I'm alive?"

She could not hear her own voice. Her ears were not working.

She looked around while unsteadily sitting on the ground.

The floor of the vast station entrance had smoke and wind racing across it.

An explosion had definitely occurred. However, she was still alive.

"What happened?"

She could faintly hear that question. Sound was returning to her ears.

She could hear the sound of wind. And she looked in the direction that wind was blowing from.

Backlit by the lights of the terrace and traffic circle was a single girl.

She wore a white and black outfit and stood with her back to the girl as if shielding her from the gray giant.

This feminine figure's long hair and long skirt were fluttering in the wind.

She held a giant staff-like object in her right hand and held her left hand out toward the terrace.

In front of her outstretched hand, smoke swirled above the terrace and a chunk of its floor had been gouged out.

The wind raced by and the smoke lingering over the terrace was blown away.

The giant still stood beyond the terrace.

The cowering girl's question regarding what was going on was cut off by a high-pitched voice. The voice belonged to this new girl standing before her eyes.

"Sayama-kun. This is Shinjou. …One intruder detected . Making contact."

Another voice replied to her words.

"I can see all that, Shinjou-kun."

This voice was male. And it came from very nearby.

The girl looked up with the cat still in her arms to find a young man standing there.

He was likely the person named Sayama. He wore white and black clothes that resembled a military uniform, he had a single stripe of white on the sides of his slicked back hair, and he had a sharp look in his eyes.

"Hm," he muttered with a nod in the wind while looking down at the girl and the cat. "How unusual."

He stretched out a hand and stroked her head. His fingers felt tough.

The girl suddenly recalled the instrument she had broken.

If this had not happened today, would she have ever broken it?

And as soon as that question appeared in her heart, Sayama spoke.

"Well done."

Strength left her at those words.

She felt as if her body was sinking into the floor.

Oh, no, she thought, but she was already losing consciousness by that point.

"Now then…"

Sayama supported the collapsed girl's back with a hand and lowered her slender body to the floor.

The cat showed no sign of leaving her side. It remained with her like a guard.

Sayama gave a bitter smile before turning toward the girl he had called Shinjou. He raised his elbow and scratched at his hair.

"What's the situation?"

"Our enemies are 15 human-types and 3 Heavy Gods of War. Our main force has been deployed to deal with all of them. We have not had anything on this nice of a large scale in a while. I think we should have let the Concept Space fully take hold just beforehand."

"It looked like Harakawa and Heo-kun were going nuts at an extreme low altitude a bit ago…"

"They were driving out the one over there. Ryuuji-kun and Mikage-san are battling the other two. But the northern entrance…just look. It's been blown away."

When Sayama heard what Shinjou had to say, he exaggeratedly shook his head and spread his arms wide.

"We even told Harakawa not to cause so much destruction. If our destruction rate goes up any further, we will never be able to apologize to the future world. Don't you think that delinquent needs to be tortured just once?"

"I am sure Heo-kun will tell you to be gentle with him."

"How about you shut up!?" came a staticky male voice from Sayama's neck.

Sayama looked down at the communications phone-mic attached to his neck and tilted his head in confusion.

"What are you talking about Harakawa? I am saying this for your sake and for the world's sake. I can introduce you to someone for that later. Depending on the voltage, I hear you'll be much more obedient in about 5 seconds."

"Sayama, there's one important thing I've always wanted to say to you."

"What might that be? No normal praise will get any reaction out of me."

"Go to hell."

After hearing the staticky sound of the transmission ending, Sayama brought a hand to his forehead.

"Honestly, he is such a troublesome guy. People with that much pride are only harmful to this world."

"…Have you ever looked in a mirror?" asked Shinjou.

"I have. I check over myself thoroughly every morning and night, but what does that have to do with Harakawa ?"

"Oh, nothing. I was only seeing once more just how strangely wonderful you are, Sayama-kun." Shinjou spoke while continuing to face the giant beyond the terrace. "How is that girl?"

"She's fine. She is injured, but she did not lose."

"I see," said Shinjou as she finally turned around. She looked at the girl sleeping on the floor and narrowed her eyes. "I am glad. It was worth using up all of my defensive concept charms on that attack."

The giant began to move.

It lowered its hips while creating mechanical noises. With each step it loudly smashed the asphalt below its feet.

But it was not Shinjou that reacted to the sound of the ground splitting open; it was Sayama.

He first lowered the hand on his forehead to his chest, raised it up next to his face, and then sliced it to the side. He then loudly snapped his fingers.

"Now then, Shinjou-kun. Double-check the situation with everyone before we punish this idiot who is disobeying the solutions gathered in Low-Gear."

Shinjou looked forward. The cannon on its right arm was aimed directly at her.

"So you're motivated because I have no defenses left? What a pain." She brought her left hand up to her neck. " This is Shinjou. We have made contact with the intruder and secured her. We are currently…"

Before she could finish speaking, the giant machine known as a Heavy God of War fired.

It all began there.

The great power flying toward her was a large artillery shell with a metal outer casing.

As this power tore through the wind toward her, Shinjou continued speaking.

"…engaging the enemy Heavy God of War."

As Sayama watched on, Shinjou spun her large staff around vertically with a single movement of her right fingers.

The belly of the staff stopped on her right shoulder, leaving it lying vertically. With a single metallic noise, she grabbed hold of the front portion with her left hand. Her right hand ran across the side of the staff. Her right fingers were moving toward a single long panel made of something like glass.

Her fingers wrote something there.

"We fear seeking power but do not fear using power!"

The writing appeared in a blue light over the transparent panel and then disappeared.

The shell arrived as if in response.

But Sayama showed no concern about the shell from where he stood behind Shinjou.

He was looking only at Shinjou. With a hand on his chin, he looked at her thin back, her slender hips, and her round ass. His eyes narrowed and he let out a breath.

"So beautiful. Give it your best shot."

Shinjou let out a bitter smile and operated her staff. She slid the portion in her left hand forward and a grip appeared. She grabbed that and pushed it in to cock it. When she pressed the trigger on the grip, the staff would fire a counter attack.

And she pressed it.

They could hear the sound of the air being split. Shinjou's body was knocked back. The output point on the end of the staff split open and burst apart.

And in exchange for all that, a white light was emitted.

The white light stabbed through the air and erased the flying shell.

The light did not dim there. The white afterimage continued in a gentle upward curve and struck the gray God of War.

There was a great noise of impact.

The armor panel on the God of War's chest was smashed. The light that burst out held great power.

"!"

A solid sound tore through the air and that giant form of over 10 meters had its head thrown backwards.

A heavy noise followed as the entire mass of metal collapsed backwards.

A hot wind blew through the entrance, passing by first Shinjou and then Sayama.

And Sayama saw something.

Beyond the wind, shadows were appearing from the staircases leading up to the entrance from either side.

These bestial shadows looked like a wolf walking on two feet. They were over two meters tall. Six of them arrived from the left and four from the right.

Sayama nodded as he saw them lower their stance in preparation for an attack.

"Now, the girl you attacked did not scream to the very end, so I hope you can give this some effort, too."

He began walking forward through the center of the blowing wind. His footsteps sounded loudly as he gave a slight smile.

"Let's go all out. I am just as lenient with everyone. I won't hold back."

Sayama's flowing voice joined his footsteps.

Shinjou walked alongside him. She held her broken staff as if embracing it, opened her mouth, and began singing.

It was a hymn. It was a verse of Silent Night.

"Silent night, holy night.

Shepherds first see the sight.

Told by angelic Alleluja,

Sounding everywhere, both near and far.

'Christ the Savior is here.'

'Christ the Savior is here.' "

Sayama opened his mouth as he listened to the song. He spoke into the phone-mic on his neck.

"Everyone!" He swung up his right arm while staring at his foes. "Let me say it here. …The surname Sayama indicates a villain!"

Shinjou gave a slight smile while singing next to him. Sayama returned the smile.

"I am giving you an order here! Do not become lost here and do not lose them. After all, if anyone is lost here , this world will become that much lonelier." He took a breath and raised his head. "Do you understand!? Then ahead! Ahead! Go ahead! Give these idiots a punch and a warning before they do anything stupid! And then bring them here! If you understand, then give me a response!"

As he watched the enemies before his eyes, Sayama forcefully swung his hand down to the right. The right sleeve of his uniform stretched and let out a loud sound like paper being struck.

Voices replied to him both from the phone-mic and from the area around him.

"Testament!"

"Okay," agreed Sayama before continuing to walk forward.

The crouched shadows before him were growling and seconds away from bursting forward.

Sayama gave a slight smile and spread out his left arm.

His right arm had already been spread, so it now looked like he was preparing to embrace his enemies.

And while continuing to smile, he said, "Now, how about we all come to an understanding!?"

The story now returns two years to the spring of 2005.

It was probably at that moment
When that which had been stopped
Began moving once more

It was probably at that moment

When that which had been stopped

Began moving once more

—To me, trying to find or soothe oneself is nothing more than an illusion.

Chapter 1: Sayama's Beginning

Chapter 1

“Sayama’s Beginning”

The privilege of those who know themselves
Is being able to restrict oneself
There is no more relying on others

The privilege of those who know themselves

Is being able to restrict oneself

There is no more relying on others

Below the blue sky were two rows of blossoming cherry trees.

The road between those two rows led to a cement wall surrounding a large area of land. The stone gatepost at the opening to the west was inscribed with the words " Takaakita Academy".

The schedule posted on the gate read "spring break" and the gate itself sat open with no one to pass through.

Once one passed through the gate, the central road continued with the cherry trees on either side.

These trees were in full bloom as well. Continuing further led to a half hectare general sports ground to the right and a martial arts facility as large as a great hall to the left.

Continuing straight on led not to a school building but to a faculty building.

The school buildings were lined up in all four compass points with the faculty building at the center. This was all one school, but other than the six general school buildings, it was broken down by specialization. To provide a proper environment, some of the school buildings were surrounded by rows of trees, but others had a research plant equipped with a silo or an asphalt course for test driving.

The buildings built very nearby those school buildings were the student dormitories.

This school took up the area that would cover three-fourths of a city. It had a few shopping districts, farms, and factories on the grounds and a lot of the city's people lived inside it.

And every facility within possessed a certain mark.

It was the mark of IAI, the Izumo Aviation Institute. IAI supported this academy city.

However, the academy was nearly deserted during spring break.

This was even true for the western general school buildings nearest the main gate.

A single figure could be seen at the 2nd year general education building just north of the faculty building.

A boy stood on the 2nd story landing of the emergency staircase.

Despite it being spring break, the boy wore his school uniform, blazer and all, and the buttons of his shirt were buttoned all the way up to the collar.

His hair was slicked back and a single stripe of white could be seen on either side. Below that hair were sharp eyes and a sharp face.

He was looking up into the sky.

Floating in the blue sky were thin white clouds and the shadow of an airplane making a wide curve through the air.

"So the American soldiers at Yokota are not taking a break either. They also prefer high places like me. And they too do not return home even when they have the chance," he said.

He swung up his left arm and the sleeve slid down. A white scar could be seen on his left fist and he wore a woman's ring on the middle finger. A silver wristwatch was also revealed on his left wrist. The hands pointed to 2:30 PM.

He pulled a single piece of paper from his pocket.

"Sayama Mikoto-sama. To complete the transfer of rights left with us by your grandfather, the late Sayama Kaoru-shi, we ask that you visit the Okutama IAI General Tokyo Facility on March 30 at 6 PM."

It was an invitation. That simple text was followed by an IAI map and the name of the one inviting Sayama.

"IAI section chief, Ooshiro Kazuo, hm?"

…The old man, hm?

When Sayama's grandfather had died, that elderly man had been the first to come rushing over for the funeral. The tall, gray-haired man always wore a white coat at IAI. The two of them would speak every once in a while and the man seemed to enjoy it when Sayama called him "old man".

But as Sayama looked at the invitation, he muttered, " My grandfather was a corporate blackmailer, so what rights could he have had at IAI?"

He turned around to find the emergency exit and the wall. The aluminum door was polished, but the wall was dirty with sand and dust. Out of sudden curiosity, he approached the wall and touched it. The sand came off and stuck to his finger.

"Hm…"

Just as he wiped off his finger, the emergency exit moved a bit.

A young woman in personal clothes poked her head out through the slight opening. As the bangs of her short

brown hair waved, her blue eyes turned in the direction Sayama had been not long before. "Huh?" she said and tilted her head.

Sayama said, "Over here, Ooki-sensei. You must have a lot of free time to be at school during spring break."

Hearing that, the woman named Ooki frowned and turned around.

"I was sleeping and-…wait, the same goes for you. Are you trying to fully enjoy your youth by staring into the sky in a place like this? Also, Sayama-kun."

"What is it? If you have a question, then out with it."

"Okay, my first question: Why do you speak like that to your teacher?"

"That is my acting style. You lose as soon as you question it, Ooki-sensei. Now, any other questions?"

"Okay, my second question: If I punch a student during spring break does it count as school violence?"

"It does not matter as long as no one finds out. So who are you planning to punch? This must be quite a troublemaker if they can anger you."

"And my final question: …Have you ever looked in a mirror?"

"I use one for a good long time every day. You really do like asking such obvious questions."

"I was an idiot to try asking questions to someone filled with such originality. In fact, are you sure that acting style is okay?"

In response to that annoyed comment, Sayama removed his hand from the wall and swiped it forcefully through the air. The cloth of the sleeve let out a noise.

"Do not worry. I act this way to everyone. I intend to head down that path in the future, after all. It may be selfish of me, but I do not want people to say I suddenly started acting full of myself when I grow up. …This may give you some trouble though."

Ooki's neck relaxed and she gave a bitter smile at that last line.

"You should probably say that last part to the other teachers as well. Oh, but it seems I will be your homeroom teacher next year as well."

"So you managed to get one of the best students in your class. Excellent work for a newcomer teacher with little authority."

"Would you sympathize with me if I told you the other teachers were forcing the excellent but overly individual students on me?"

Sayama placed a hand on Ooki's shoulder and nodded with a completely serious expression.

"If you seek sympathy, it is all over for you, Ooki-sensei. Although you may be almost there already."

"Sorry, this is irritating me, so it would be nice if you would stop." Ooki walked out onto the emergency staircase with her eyes half closed. She scratched at her head and said, "Talking with you really exhausts me. You take everything so seriously."

Sayama gave a slight smile at that.

"Seriously? I-…"

"You don't? But you were elected vice president in the student council election and your grades are excellent."

"True," said Sayama with a nod. He folded his arms and thought for a bit. Three seconds later, "I have never once gotten serious. …I just can't make myself want to."

"…Eh?"

Sayama ignored Ooki's questioning voice and shrugged.

"Then again, everything I run across in school ends before I even have a chance to get serious. I was once scolded by my grandfather. He told me not to settle for being the ruler of a small place."

"I see," said Ooki with a nod. She leaned up against the emergency staircase landing's railing. "Your grandfather was an amazing person. Compared to him, I can see where you are coming from."

"Yes. Compared to my grandfather who would give Japan's economy a nice smack from the shadows, the vice president of this academy city is nothing."

"It's more than nothing."

"But it is true I have never actually tested myself. During the race for vice president, my opponent grew so desperate by the end that he even danced around naked in an attempt to gain more popularity. He was simply no match for me."

"Were you the one that fired a bottle rocket at his butt while he was performing that nude dance?"

"No, that was Izumo while he was crushing everyone else in the presidential race. He even used a metal pipe as a gun barrel to increase his accuracy. Not something you would expect of a third year."

"In that case, I won't ask who blew up the stage afterwards…"

"That would be for the best. Are you gradually learning how to get along in life, Ooki-sensei?"

"Yes, yes. But I'm starting to get worried about being the next advisor for the student council…" Ooki frowned and sighed before continuing. "Is school really that boring to you?"

Sayama stopped moving when he heard that.

He turned his gaze to meet that of Ooki's blue eyes.

After a short pause, he gave a small shake of the head.

"I have no complaints with the school. It is true the student council election and the tests are all such small things that I do not need to grow serious about. However , that does not mean school is boring. It is only natural to feel that school is a small place. And I think that school has its own unique things to enjoy."

"What a complicated child…"

After falling silent for a short while, Ooki bent her back over the railing she was leaning against and looked up into the sky.

Meanwhile, Sayama glanced at his watch. It was 2:50.

"Ooki-sensei, I think I should get back to my dorm soon."

"Are you leaving soon?"

"Yes. After changing into a suit, I need to receive something similar to my grandfather's will."

Sayama opened the emergency exit. Ooki frantically got up from the railing and charged through the open door. Sayama also entered the school building as he closed the door.

Sayama walked through the hallway alongside Ooki. The last school newspaper of the year was attached to the classroom-side wall. The First PR Club put out the paper weekly. It generally carried articles related to IAI and this issue contained the school's employment rate to IAI as well as a few other pieces of news.

Ooki stopped as she looked over at an article at her eyelevel which was one level below Sayama's.

"They have detected an extrasolar star system with a high probability of being habitable. …That's amazing!"

"It's only been discovered. Just looking at this article will tell you how difficult a problem anything further would be."

Sayama pointed at another article. The article's photograph showed a giant pile of machinery lying collapsed on a large area of asphalt.

"According to this, they created an 8-meter-tall bipedal robot and it failed spectacularly. The joints were made too weak so its knees broke just from walking. …No matter what we may discover, it means nothing if we do not have the technology to use it."

"Hm. So it's the same as spotting a good-looking girl but not knowing how to talk to her."

"I am glad you are so wise. Is that something you told yourself as an excuse?"

"Well, last Christmas, some of my friends and I…wait, no."

When Ooki said that, Sayama realized she was looking up at his face.

Why is she staring? he wondered.

"Is it that rare to see me smile?"

"No, it's not that it's rare. It's interesting."

Ooki began walking once more. Sayama followed.

Ooki asked, "Can I ask you about your grandfather?"

"Of course," replied Sayama.

He had nothing to hide.

And so he spoke. He talked about a lot as they walked.

He told her how his grandfather had left the war during World War 2 and had begun researching something.

"And it seems the Izumo Aviation Institute was involved at the time. After the war, he used the connections and discoveries he had made as a base to set out into the financial world and become a corporate blackmailer."

"A corporate blackmailer, hm?"

"He did a lot of pretty horrible things. …Every time he was in the newspaper, he would give the following line."

Ooki nodded and cut in.

" 'The surname Sayama indicates a villain', right? I saw it once in a weekly magazine."

"That's right. My grandfather was a villain through and through. When he saw some giant opponent as an enemy or evil, he would fight them by becoming an even greater evil. And…that is also why I do not want to grow serious about anything."

"That is?"

"I am inexperienced. 'The surname Sayama indicates a villain.' My grandfather always told me my abilities were meant to perform necessary evils. However, I lost him when all he had taught me was how to do it."

"So… You don't know when the evil you perform is truly necessary?"

"Yes. I do not want to die, so there may be times when I will get serious. However, growing serious when I cannot tell if it is truly necessary is a frightening thing."

As he spoke, Sayama suddenly brought his right hand to the left side of his chest.

As he brought his hand inside his coat and held his chest, Ooki spoke without turning toward him.

"It sounds like you have it tough in your own way."

"Yes," he nodded.

"Then can I ask you about your father?"

"Why?"

"I never asked last year despite being your homeroom teacher, and…" The ends of her eyebrows lowered. "I think this is part of a teacher's job."

Sayama nodded as he lightly held the left side of his chest. After taking a breath, he spoke.

"There is nothing to worry about. It is a simple issue. More importantly, how much do you know, Ooki-sensei? I am curious."

Ooki glanced upwards and folded her arms.

"Your father was adopted by your grandfather and he entered IAI at the same time as your mother. However,

he was killed in the great Kansai earthquake at the end of 95. Your mother, um, well, brought you with her and-…"

Ooki trailed off and Sayama smiled bitterly.

"Before I tell you not to worry about it, I need to correct some of that. My father died as a secondary casualty of the earthquake when he was sent by IAI for earthquake relief."

Sayama took a breath. He held up his empty left hand. That scarred left fist had a women's ring on the middle finger. The pearl decoration glittered a bit in the dimly lit hallway.

Ooki turned to look at it as she walked.

However, Sayama also looked at the ring instead of looking at her.

"Go where those precious to you are waiting, hm?"

As his words deepened, Sayama felt as if something was moving within the left side of his chest.

It was pain.

And it felt like his chest was creaking.

It was coming.

And then Sayama saw Ooki looking up at him with her face completely pale.

"Sayama-kun. A-are you okay?"

He tried to answer "yes", but he realized he was not breathing. When his body bent forward, he realized someone had suddenly started to support his chest.

Ooki had caught him from below.

"Ah…"

When he heard Ooki say that, all of his body's senses returned.

He first felt exhaustion. He then felt he could breathe again and sweat poured from his back and legs.

He brought strength to his legs to stand up, but Ooki was still lightly holding her arms out toward him.

"A-are you okay?"

"I am fine."

"Really? Okay? You are okay?"

"I am okay, but that is not correct English." His body was now obviously returning to normal. He nodded and said, "I am fine, so do not worry. It seems I get stress-induced anginas from this topic."

"Then why did you agree to talk about it?"

"Didn't you say you wanted to know? You truly are a horrible teacher if you forgot that."

"Oh, but , um…"

As Ooki began frantically waving her hands in denial, Sayama smiled again.

"What are you trying to deny? Think about it. I am free to say what I want. And you are free to support me when I fall. I would say you performed the better deed here. Don't you agree? But let me say one thing." Sayama removed his right hand from his chest. "My mother would often tell me she hoped I could do something one

day. I have to wonder if she ever did anything. And now the child raised hearing that has no idea what he can do. And so I must ask: what should I do?"

"I see… So you do not know what you can do." Ooki nodded and her shoulders drooped. She looked up at Sayama and earnestly said, "I finally understand why you are so extreme about everything."

"I cannot overlook that. Who are you calling extreme?"

"What? You didn't hear me? I said it quite clearly. Is that a nose on the side of your head?"

Sayama's left hand gave a lightning-fast flick against the forehead that had asked that question so seriously.

"Eeee," groaned Ooki as she crouched down.

Sayama brought a hand to his chin and said, "Some teachers can say truly horrible things about their students."

In the end, Sayama did not leave his dorm until past four.

It had taken time to put on the three-piece suit he had inherited from his grandfather and to prepare the seal and digital recording device needed for official records. He wrote down his time of departure at the dorm's reception desk and left.

The sun was still in the sky.

He walked through the gravel clearing located between the general school buildings and the dorm. It normally functioned as a faculty parking lot. He was headed toward the main gate.

As he cut behind the second year general school building as a shortcut, he heard baby birds singing in the trees.

As he listened, Sayama heard two sounds other than the chirping of the birds.

The first was organ music coming from the music room on the second story of the school building.

"Silent Night…"

He recalled occasionally hearing it on the weekends. However, this was the first time he had been able to

determine exactly where it was coming from. He wondered who was playing it, but it was so perfectly played that he assumed it was not a student.

And as the organ music played, another sound could be heard approaching.

It was the sound of a motorcycle engine. Specifically, the low tone of a 4-stroke.

As he heard that noise coming from the direction of the main gate, Sayama muttered, "Izumo and Kazami."

He then walked out to the asphalt road west of the school building.

He looked out toward the faculty building, the vast sports ground, and the martial arts facility. He spotted two people riding a motorcycle appearing out from the side of the faculty building. Despite the large amount of exhaust, the black touring motorcycle moved smoothly along the road.

Aboard the motorcycle were a well-built young man wearing a thin brown coat and a girl with semi-short hair and carrying a black rucksack. The back bared by the girl 's white sleeveless top pointed in Sayama's direction.

The two were chatting while riding the motorcycle.

Suddenly, the young man noticed Sayama. A friendly smile appeared on his fairly long face.

"Hey," he said with a raised hand.

He then stopped the motorcycle next to Sayama.

The young man was over 180 cm tall and broad-shouldered, so he supported the weight of the heavy motorcycle with his leg.

The girl swayed gently and rested up against the young man's back.

The young man smiled with the girl leaning up against him.

He looked up and said, "Where do you think you're going, Sayama you idiot? To go spew insults at someone? "

Sayama brought a hand to his forehead and sighed.

With a troubled tone of voice, he said, "Izumo, unlike you, my brain is working properly. And I have never spewed insults at anyone, you sick bastard."

"Sure, sure. Thanks for keeping up your acting style even during spring break."

"No need to thank me. But should the three top members of the student council really be having this sort of conversation?"

The young man, Izumo, smiled bitterly at that.

"Of course not," he agreed.

The girl leaning on his back turned their way.

"Sayama, you're going to IAI, right?"

"Yes, I am. Kazami, Izumo. What about you two?"

"I was just headed back to the dorm to have some fun with Chisato…kh!"

As he spoke, Izumo's head twisted upwards. The girl named Kazami had grabbed at Izumo's head and jaw from behind. A delicate sound came from Izumo's neck and he gently fell backwards.

"Kaku, that is not what he asked. Sayama wanted to know where we had been."

Izumo's head came to rest on top of Kazami's thighs and he stopped moving.

"There, there," said Kazami as she stroked his head. She then showed Sayama the black rucksack next to her and smiled.

"We went into the city. We bought some clothes, new music, and other stuff for the All Holiday Festival. Being on the edge of Tokyo really makes you forget all about culture."

"…I see. But you two are third years and you live together, right?"

The girl, Kazami, thought for a bit looking troubled, but then spoke.

"Well, that's how it turned out. Now, when I try to mingle with the others, they're overly cautious about how they treat me. My role in the dorm has become that of an older sister. An underclassman even apologized just for passing by me in the hall."

"Your face seems to be turning to cement."

Kazami turned her head down, said "Oh, sorry", and relaxed her shoulders. She casually clapped a hand against Izumo who was lying motionless on her thighs.

"Don't turn into an idiot like him, okay? He abuses his authority as the son of IAI."

"It seems to me you are enjoying that abuse quite a lot."

"I know that, and that's why it angers me so much. He needs to at least take his student council job seriously." Kazami raised her head to look Sayama in the eye. "Oh, right. Sayama, I was thinking of having our first student council job for the term in the 2nd year school building's Kinugasa Library. Do you have time? The three of us can make some plans for the All Holiday Festival and Invitation Festival in the spring."

"I have to head out today and I do not know how late I will be back."

"We're leaving for the city again tomorrow afternoon, so how about 9 AM tomorrow in the Kinugasa Library?"

"I can do that," agreed Sayama. He glanced over at the school building next to them. "The Kinugasa Library, hm ?"

On the western side of the second year general school building's ground floor, an area four classroom's length across was sticking out. It stuck out about the width of a classroom. Inside this space was an area equal to eight classrooms.

A look in the windows would show the backs of wooden panels. These thick wooden panels created the silhouettes of bookshelves.

The room was a library.

Almost the entire eight classroom space was filled with books and the hallway and basement had been used for extra book storage. That was the Kinugasa Library.

As Sayama glanced toward the library's window, he heard Kazami speaking.

"The library created by the school's founder isn't a bad place for our first job, right? The librarian, old man Siegfried, may be unsociable, but he does put out tea. We

used that place a fair bit during the election, so I was thinking we could continue to use it as our base."

"This year's treasurer certainly is different."

"I think the president and vice president will be quite different as well. But what do you think? Are upperclassmen like us suitable for someone as prideful as you?"

"I think that statement alone shows you can compete with me when it comes to pride. …But at the very least, there is no one in this school who is better suited. Izumo Kaku, the son of IAI which supports this city of Akigawa, and Kazami Chisato, the girl who shares a room with him, are true problem children."

"…"

"There is no way you two are ignorant of what the world says about you. I respect you for your ability to continue acting like this regardless."

Hearing that, Kazami showed off her teeth slightly and looked down at Izumo who lay on her legs.

"Well, it doesn't matter what people say. Kaku may cause problems, but he is not a bad person."

"The same goes for you, Kazami."

"Then what about you, Mr. Family of Villains?" Kazami raised her head to look at Sayama. She glanced up and down his suit. "You look good enough, but you make things difficult."

"In what way?"

"I'm having difficulty imagining who would stand next to you. I can't imagine someone to balance out your idiocy like Kaku is for me."

"There is no one out there with enough power to handle me on an equal footing."

"That isn't what I mean." Kazami gave a troubled smile. She lightly waved her hand front and back. "I'm talking about balance. Equals can only stand on the same side of the scales, right? You need a counterbalance."

Sayama thought on the meaning of Kazami's words.

And, "Someone like that would either be an opposing force or a hindrance."

"So am I an opposing force or hindrance to Kaku?"

That question was spoken with a small smile. Sayama relaxed his shoulders.

"I do not know the answer to that, so I cannot argue about it with someone like you who does know the answer."

"Oh, how honest."

"I am an honest person, Kazami. It is just that, for some odd reason, I seem to end up in trouble for it from time to time. Is this what they mean when they say an honest man will look a fool? Yes, our ancestors said some excellent things."

"Okay, sure. If that's how you want to view it in your personal universe, I won't stop you."

Sayama smiled bitterly at that. He exchanged a glance with Kazami and spoke.

"Fine, then. I will admit relationships like yours and Izumo's exist. However, I am doubtful the same could happen to me. I also think it is a problem to even think about placing someone like that next to me."

"A problem?"

"The surname Sayama indicates a villain. What do you put next to evil?"

Kazami had no answer to that. She only let her shoulders droop and sighed.

"You really are a complicated person."

"Ooki-sensei said the same thing earlier."

"Everyone thinks it. We also wonder when exactly you will get serious about something."

"I have never done it, so I couldn't say. …And if I did, I am so inexperienced I would likely be afraid of myself."

"…You really are complicated, Sayama."

"You do not need to repeat yourself," said Sayama with a smile before lightly tapping Izumo's back where he lay unmoving as if asleep. "You're awake, right? Hurry on back and dive headfirst into your unrestrained lifestyle."

"Eh?" muttered Kazami as she looked down.

Izumo opened his eyes.

"Hey."

"No, not 'hey'. If you came to, why didn't you get up?"

"You smell really good, Chisato."

Izumo's eyes bent upwards happily as Kazami blushed.

"Ha," laughed Sayama before patting Kazami on the shoulder, turning his back, and walking off.

He continued toward the main gate.

As he did, he noticed a new figure.

Someone was walking down the stairs from the second floor of the 2nd year general school building.

It was a tall elderly man. He wore a black vest, black trousers, and black gloves. He was bald and had a beard.

"Siegfried Zonburg, the librarian."

Sayama had spoken with him a few times during his student council work. The man used only the bare minimum of words.

"You do not often see him outside of the Kinugasa Library," he muttered before continuing on.

He looked around once more and saw nothing but the scenery of the school near the peak of spring.

"Such a peaceful place…"

Behind him, he heard repeated sounds of flesh being struck followed by screams from Izumo.

The sun was setting in the west.

Below that setting sun, even a forest surrounded by mountains had light passing through it like wind.

The forest was primarily made up of cedars. A single figure was fallen in front of one of those trees.

The figure was sitting on the ground.

This middle-aged man sat such that the sun shined on him from the side. His close-cropped hair was wet with something so it reflected the sun. The liquid wetting his hair dripped down his forehead and dyed the left half of his face a dark color.

His clothes resembled a white and black military uniform. However, the left shoulder and left leg of that uniform had split open and something dark could be seen flowing out as he breathed erratically.

He stretched out his left hand and scratched at the ground. With the blood in his eyes, he might as well have been blind. His left hand wandered across the ground.

Eventually, he managed to pick something up from between the rocks and fallen leaves.

It was a long gun made of metal. The side was engraved with something written in German.

He embraced the gun tightly and took a deep breath. He stuck a finger into the pouch on his right hip.

"This is Tsuurin Daiichi. My current location is in the mountains near Point 3 between Okutama and Shiromaru. I succeeded in preventing the single enemy from escaping. I successfully read the enemy's string vibration and sent it in. Currently…everyone but me has been taken out. Please hurry."

A staticky voice replied from near his throat. It was a female voice.

"Testament. The special division is on their way. We will send aid for you as well, so withdraw."

"Tes. …Or so I'd like to say. Unfortunately, my leg was taken out. And my healing tools and spells were destroyed along with it. I only have my favorite weapon left to rely on. …When I asked you to hurry, I meant the special division, not aid for me." He took a deep breath while sweating profusely. "The enemy is from a faction of 1st-Gear's revolutionary army. Yes, a werewolf from

the second royal palace faction. He likely came for negotiations with the pacifist faction. He must have had a 1st-Gear philosopher's stone because he turned into a wolf in this real world."

"Do not speak. The concept space will be deployed in another five minutes."

"Ha ha. Make it so a silver bullet will work. Also, young girl…or is it young lady? Anyway, you don't think this is our fault, do you?"

He was met with silence. He cast his eyes down before continuing.

"Fine. It was our mistake for deciding to go. In the standard division, we have the right to choose…right?"

Once again, he received only silence. Yet he did not stop.

"What unit are you from? Even in the special division, not many units have women in them. But I think there was one put together recently. A unit filled with beautiful UCAT-raised girls and women. I think it was the IAI-…"

He stopped speaking. His eyes opened wide and he stood up by using the tree behind him as a support.

"Hey, when I get back, meet me with flowers. It'll be a triumphant return. What's in bloom this time of year?"

"Testament. I think Primula modesta and the like are."

"No, you're supposed to say you are."

He laughed and removed his right hand from the pouch. He moved the long gun from his left hand to his right. He bit the strap, used the stock and grip in his right hand to create three points of support, and faced forward .

He heard wind ahead of him.

A large shadow could be seen in the setting sun shining on the mountain. It was slowly approaching while swaying back and forth.

There was no sign. He simply followed the sound of the wind and squeezed the trigger.

A gunshot travelled across the forest along with the light of the setting sun.

Sayama opened his eyes aboard a train running through the mountains on the way to Okutama.

He had dozed off due to the setting sun shining on his seated back. And he had woken up due to…

"The train has stopped?"

He glanced around the train. The only passengers besides himself were two people seated a short distance away.

One was a white-haired man wearing a black suit. The other was a white-haired girl wearing black clothes and seated next to him. They may have been father and daughter and they were looking outside the opposite window.

Sayama followed their gaze out the window.

There he found the mountains of Okutama. They were all formed from round shapes and no small hills could be seen.

"So we are around the second tunnel near Shiromaru. Only one more stop to Okutama."

He was familiar with the terrain here. He continued speaking while looking out at those similar-looking mountains.

"This is thanks to Hiba-sensei forcing me to run through these mountains."

…If I had not learned the land, I would not have been found until spring.

Sayama nodded and looked down at his left hand. His skin was white around the bones of his fist as if something had scattered across it. His eyes turned toward the ring on the middle finger of that scarred fist.

"It was also around here that we got out of the car when my mother took me with her back then…" he muttered.

According to his watch, it was 5:30 PM. He was to be at IAI at 6:00 PM.

When he calculated the time, his heart seemed to stiffen. He stood up, raised his suit collar to fix it with a snapping noise, and approached the two other passengers. The white-haired man raised his head. The man was wearing sunglasses, but Sayama could tell the man was looking at him. Sayama gave a quick bow.

"Excuse me. Why is the train stopped?"

"It received a stop signal. Once it is released, it will return to Shiromaru."

The man's tone had a bit of amusement mixed in and Sayama realized he was younger than he looked. Sayama had initially assumed he was elderly, but a closer look showed he was only just entering middle age.

The girl next to him wore the black dress and white apron of a maid. She was not the man's daughter.

…I had heard the ownership of a lot of the mountains around here stretches way back.

Sayama noticed the girl was holding a staff. It was a metal cane that could be attached to the wrist. It was clearly too long for her to use. However, Sayama ended

his investigation of them here. He needed to know something else.

"Why is this train returning?"

"Maybe there was an accident."

"I see," nodded Sayama, realizing the man must not know the details either.

Suddenly, the girl sitting next to the man looked up at Sayama. With her eyebrows lying flat and no discernible expression on her face, her black eyes that were almost purple peered deep into Sayama's eyes.

She took a breath and then opened her mouth.

"My apologies," she said in a low, fairly mature voice.

"Think nothing of it," said Sayama before turning his back on the two of them.

He opened the opposite window and heard the same voice as before from behind him.

"Are you getting out?"

"I cannot go back. Also, someone is waiting for me."

"You are being hasty. The train might soon continue forward. Once you regret a decision, it is too late to turn back."

"I do not know what god of advice you are, but let me tell you something. A decision can lead to joy just as easily as it can regret. I appreciate your concern, but I know this land. And is there anything truly dangerous in this world?"

"True… That is very true. There is no danger in this world," said the man before closing his mouth in a smile below the sunglasses.

As soon as the man spread his legs out from the seat, Sayama stuck his legs out the window and jumped out.

He landed on the gravel supporting the railroad. He ran out into the open air and onto the mountainside bathed in the light of the setting sun.

"…"

Sayama did not turn back toward the train up the slope from him. He continued through the forest spreading out before him.

He trampled the underbrush as he headed down the mountain.

After only a few breaths, he sank into the shadows produced by the forest. The setting sun coming from the side and the branches of the trees drew a grid of shadows across him. This light and air were familiar to him.

"It's been two years since I stopped coming to Okutama. I suppose the Hiba Dojo is still around."

As he muttered that comment, he heard a metallic noise from behind him.

A whistle sounded and the train began to move. He heard it move up toward Shiromaru. The sound of the receding wheels told Sayama he had made the right decision.

"Good," he said with a nod as he quickened his pace.

Shiromaru Station was an unmanned train station.

When the train came to a stop, the few passengers disinterestedly exited onto the long, narrow platform.

A short distance away from those bored individuals were the two people Sayama had spoken to just before.

The white-haired man held the cane in one hand as he stood next to a card-only payphone located in the shadow of a private home outside the station.

The girl dressed as a maid stood in front of him holding the receiver for the green telephone.

She pulled a bundle of telephone cards from her apron like it was a deck of playing cards.

She quickly lined the cards up in front of the green phone and turned toward the man.

"Itaru-sama. Why do you not carry a cell phone?"

"Because I am a coward, Sf. Remember that. If the phone rang, it would probably give me a heart attack."

"How about I carry it for you?"

"No. You have not acquired the skill to take messages. If you cannot always answer as if I am gone even when I am with you, there is no point in you having a cell phone . Do you understand?"

"Tes. I understand that possessing one would be meaningless on a fundamental level."

The girl called Sf stopped lining up the cards while looking at him. She was lining up the well-used cards in order of number of uses. The punch holes showing the number of uses lined up perfectly without the slightest deviation.

Sf casually picked up one card with few uses left and slid it into the green phone.

She used her right fingers to instantly dial a number.

A few seconds later, "This is Sf. Registration Number 9609812B. Connect me to extension #0013."

Sf then handed the receiver to the man next to her. He took it and spoke.

"This is Ooshiro Itaru. Has Team Leviathan left yet, Sibyl? …I see. I just met an interesting idiot. Something stupid is about to happen. A world of stupid false good and false evil is about to unfold. …You don't understand ? No, someone like you or Sf that has not woken up wouldn't."

As Itaru spoke, Sf inserted a new card into the green telephone. When the small sound of connection indicating three minutes had been added came from the receiver, Itaru nodded to Sf. He continued speaking as he saw Sf nod back.

"Sf confirmed this idiot's string vibration. I'll have Sf give it to you, so add this idiot's vibration to the string vibration of the concept space. It's the usual type, so this change should be easy and the outside will be visible, right? Drag him in from reality. …What? You want to know who this idiot is? You'll know soon enough."

Hearing that, Sf asked, "Itaru-sama, is it really okay to get him involved like this?"

"That brat has ignorantly decided that this world is a safe place. We need to teach him a lesson and a first-hand lesson would be best. From now on, he is sure to be

overturned again and again. From here on out, he will deny all things because all things exist. He will deny joy because he knows joy. And…Yes, that will continue until the world is satisfied."

Itaru gave a small smile and handed Sf the receiver.

"Sf, tell them his string vibration. And then we will teach him what reality truly is."

Chapter 2: The Two Meet

Chapter 2

“The Two Meet”

A scream of rejection led to their meeting
So which one did she really want?

A scream of rejection led to their meeting

So which one did she really want?

When Sayama came out onto the road down below, he tilted his head in confusion alone on the sidewalk.

The cell phone in his hand would not turn on.

He had checked the battery when leaving his dorm, but now the LCD screen was dark. He shook it lightly, but nothing changed. He thought it might have to do with the signal, so he crossed the two-lane road to reach the sidewalk on the valley side, but this also did nothing. He removed and put back in the general-purpose battery that worked in all small IAI devices, but to no avail.

"What is going on?" he muttered.

But then he recalled the strange voice he had heard not long before.

As he had been travelling down the slope, he had heard a single voice.

—Precious metals possess power.

This had not been a reverberating voice amplified with a megaphone. It had been like a whisper from headphones he was wearing. However, a look around had had not shown any equipment that could have produced the noise.

And now his cell phone would not function.

He put the phone back in his pocket in confusion. According to his memory, he should reach several restaurants along the road if he walked a bit further. He decided to use a phone at one of them. Wondering what time it was, he glanced down at his watch.

"It's stopped…"

His watch had stopped. The hour hand, minute hand, and second hand were all motionless.

He frowned and put a hand in his pocket. He pulled out a digital recorder with the IAI mark on it. It was stick-shaped and the top had a red start button.

He pressed it.

However, the recorder did not respond. He remembered fully charging its general-purpose battery as well.

While wondering what all this meant, Sayama realized something else. He looked around the area and then up into the trees of the forest.

“There is no sign of anyone.”

Not many cars used this road. However, not a single one had passed by in the time he had spent climbing down the slope. On top of that, he could not see a single bird among all the trees.

Suddenly, Sayama recalled that the train had returned to Shiromaru. He wondered what had happened.

And then he heard the sound of something being struck in the distance.

The sound had come from the tree-covered slope leading down from the road and to a river.

“That was a tree collapsing.”

He looked and spotted a single distant tree on the slope that had begun to tilt. It was a cedar. The silhouette that resembled a green leaf-covered spire leaned up against the nearby trees and then collapsed.

After seeing that, Sayama moved his gaze west toward the sun setting behind Okutama.

After confirming that was his destination, he nodded.

But then he heard another noise. And this time it was not the cracking of a falling tree.

It was a scream.

"…"

Sayama instinctually raised his head.

He had definitely heard that distant, high-pitched voice. For an instant, strength filled his body, but then he stopped.

He took a breath, frowned, and thought.

He did not think for long. He only needed to remember his past. Just a single memory. He remembered when his mother had brought him into these mountains by car.

"So it is always me who is unable to keep his promises to meet someone…"

He took another breath and brought his hand to the left of his chest. A slight ache from the past lay there, but he suppressed it with his breathing.

He opened his eyes.

The crimson-dyed sky lay before his eyes. Seeing that color, Sayama nodded and began moving.

"Okay."

He turned toward the valley-side forest below. His right hand loosened his necktie while his left shoulder slipped out of his coat in an instant. By the time the coat left his right shoulder, he had already stepped atop the guardrail on the sidewalk.

He took a step.

His footstep sounded lightly as he used the guardrail as a stepping stone to propel him into the air. As the coat still on his right arm flapped about, it created a solid noise as it struck his back. At that same moment, his feet landed on the underbrush of the slope.

He began walking.

His pace was much faster than when he moved down to the road earlier. He lowered his hips to almost slide down the slope.

The sun had already started to set in the western sky that was hidden by the trees.

Once it grew dark, the forest would be dangerous.

He had to hurry. He lowered his hips even further to rush down the slope.

He entered the forest and ran between the trees. His destination was the tree that had fallen earlier.

Sayama ran straight there while treading on old, dry branches.

He was not out of breath as he had a habit of running every evening.

However, running on such bad terrain and the faint tension he felt did noticeably raise his body temperature. Even so, there was one part of his body he felt no heat in.

That was his left fist. It alone felt cold.

“Ha,” gasped Sayama in what was not quite a breath and not quite a laugh.

He was only about a dozen meters from his destination. He could hear a flowing river through the forest.

He could see several depressions that had once been small streams along the ground. He jumped over them as he ran and raised his head.

Between the trees, Sayama saw the setting sun sinking behind Okutama’s mountain range. Dusk would arrive in less than 10 minutes. The forest would grow very dark .

Hurry, Sayama called to himself.

He then spotted some small lights. They were near the tree he was running toward. Light was reflecting off of something scattered across the ground.

…Did a hiker leave some trash behind?

But he immediately rejected that idea. A hiker would not come this far to throw their trash away. They would do so near the trail or river.

He put up his guard. He stopped next to the light on the ground and looked down. He saw…

"Metal?"

Black metal fragments were scattered primarily around the southern side of a large tree.

And the fallen tree he had seen before was about five trees south of it. A cedar tree just barely too wide to reach around had fallen and the break was visible from here.

Sayama looked over at that break where that loud noise had come from before.

"That is…"

He frowned and fell silent.

The tree had been sliced at about a meter up from the ground.

It was a clean diagonal slice. About four-fifths of the trunk's diameter had been sliced through in a single blow without leaving any woodchips or sawdust at the base of the tree. The cracking sound Sayama had heard must have been the remaining fifth breaking.

He smelled a slight odd scent. It stank of something burning. He looked again and noticed a slight charring around the cut.

Sayama took a step forward to go check out the cut.

But his right foot trod on something hard.

He looked down and lifted up his foot.

Sayama recognized what he found. It was a short tube made of the same material as the metal fragments scattered around the area.

"A gun barrel."

…This is longer than the ones I have seen while staying at the Tamiya household. Perhaps it is not for a pistol.

With that thought, Sayama checked the ground once more.

He found some new information there.

They were footprints. And three different kinds.

The first was fairly old. They were large and had a mountain boot type of pattern.

The second was smaller but had a similar pattern to the first.

And the third was very strange and seemed to trample over the others. These odd footprints were easily over 30 centimeters long and had holes as if from spikes where the toes should have been.

The information did not end there. An intermittent trail of dark wet spots approached from the south.

Those wet spots continued to the tree behind Sayama.

As Sayama held his breath and did not turn around, he felt a slight sensation fall on his left shoulder.

It felt as if someone had tapped on his shoulder, so he looked over.

A single dark spot could be seen on the fabric that had been dyed light red by the setting sun.

What was that?

As if in response, another one fell on his shoulder.

It came from above.

And in the next moment…

"…!"

Sayama unhesitatingly ran forward, to the west, and toward the river he could hear.

He did not check what was above him. He already knew what it was.

If he had looked up, his footing would have been uncertain and he would have been unable to move. That instant would have put him in danger.

He had never been in danger before. And that was why Sayama began to run.

…Something is in that tree!

The instant he was sure of that, he heard something drop to the ground behind him. It was the sound of two legs landing. Two legs supporting something large. He could hear the feet sinking into the ground.

Immediately afterwards, a voice shot past Sayama and through the forest. It was a beast's roar. A howl.

…Is it a bear?

But he denied that possibility. This beast had killed its prey, carried that prey into the tree, and then waited for Sayama to notice the corpse before attacking from above. The first set of footprints belonged to the victim in the tree. The second set had likely fallen for that trap.

Sayama would have been the third victim, but only the second to fall for that strategy.

…Beasts do not use strategies like that. Only people do.

The howl from behind him had been that of a beast, yet…

"If this thing has a human intellect, I should handle it like a human."

As if pursuing those words spoken toward the ground, footsteps approached Sayama from behind.

They were fast.

Those footsteps were as deep as a bass drum and each step covered as much ground as Sayama covered in five. However, Sayama did not turn around. He focused only on not slowing his pace.

He refused to turn around. What he needed was distance, not curiosity.

The sound of the river up ahead was growing louder.

He could see light. The ground sloped sharply downwards. Ahead, he could see a rocky river bank covered in the dim light of dusk.

Once he arrived there, he would be able to see his opponent. He might also spot someone there.

Just as Sayama began to wonder if he could call for help, he noticed something odd up ahead.

He noticed the movement of the air spreading out ahead of him and a slight haze of light.

A single obstacle was covering the entire edge of the forest on the slope just above the river. It was…

"A wall!?"

The wind ahead of him was still. And the light of dusk had grown slightly hazy.

He would arrive at this supposed wall in another three seconds.

The heavy footsteps were still approaching from behind.

Should he run directly into the wall or not? In fact, did this wall even exist or not?

How could he check?

A single idea came to Sayama. He slowed his pace slightly.

Once he arrived at the supposed wall, he turned his back. It was as if he had been cornered.

He could see a shadow charging toward him.

That shadow resembled a human. The large figure was over two meters tall. Its entire body was covered in black animal hair, but torn black cloth could be seen at its waist and chest.

Its face was visible above its thick chest.

Its face resembled a dog. Below the pointed ears were two golden eyes and a red slit of a mouth.

…Is this what you call a werewolf?

He thought that idea was crazy, but only for an instant . The truth lay before his eyes.

And so he needed to move. Amid the dim light, Sayama brought both arms down and his hips back. His

opponent likely thought he was ducking down. However , Sayama was using the right hand hidden in his coat to search behind him.

In what should have been empty space, he felt resistance

It was a wall. The sensation he felt through the coat reminded him of a rough eggshell. The coat molded into the shape of that wall, so he could tell it had no gaps.

The enemy came immediately thereafter.

Sayama threw his head back to show off his throat.

The enemy's right claws were swung down. It was trying to cut off his head as it passed by. It opened its mouth and bared its fangs.

It let out a cry, but…

"Silence," said Sayama as he dropped his hips down along the wall.

The werewolf's claws cut through empty air.

Its giant body then slammed face-first into the invisible wall.

This caused a great sound of impact.

It sounded less like flesh being struck and more like a car crashing. The werewolf's entire body was knocked back by a repelling force. It flew through the air, rotated once, and caused a tremor in the earth where it landed. It then rolled.

The sounds of the beast's breaths mixed in with the sound of it rolling.

Sayama was almost lying down on the ground and he realized the chest of his vest had been torn.

"That was valuable," he complained as he stood up and filled his lungs with air.

It did not seem the werewolf had lost consciousness. However, it was lying on the ground with its chest moving up and down as it gasped for breath. It did not seem to know what had happened. The wall may have been unexpected for it as well.

…Or it simply might not have known where it was.

Sayama began running once more. He had to find a means of defeating the werewolf before it came to its senses. To remain in the werewolf's blind spot as much as possible, he ran along the edge of the invisible wall. He ran west. This was upstream of the river to his left. After running across a few gentle slopes, he could no longer see the werewolf.

"The meeting time will probably have passed before long," muttered Sayama as he looked down at his watch.

The silver hands were still not moving.

What is going on? he thought.

And then he noticed a slight light beyond the wall.

It was a vehicle's headlights.

A red RV was parked about 20 meters ahead on the rocky river bank. It was likely a family on a spring break outing. He could see the family around the RV folding up parasols and leisure tables. The family was made up

of a middle-aged couple, a young girl, and her even younger brother. The RV's headlights were pointed up the slope toward Sayama.

"Hey! You need to leave! It is-…"

He trailed off before he could say "dangerous".

Something was strange.

The family he had shouted at continued their preparations to leave without paying him any heed.

…Did they not hear me?

"Hey!!" he shouted while standing in the middle of the headlights where they could see him. However, they did not notice him.

…Can they not see or hear me?

Sayama took in a deep breath and let it out. He placed a hand on the invisible wall before him and once more muttered, "This has become very odd." And as Sayama watched on, the family climbed aboard the RV.

After a short pause, it drove off of the rocky river bank . It was headed…

"Up this slope."

Sayama ran. If he was remembering right, the main road above had a few mountain roads leading down to the river. If the invisible wall to his left extended as far as the road the family was using, the RV would strike the wall from the outside.

What would happen then?

He climbed up the slope and found the road.

The branches of the trees above seemed to create a natural tunnel over the mountain road. The dirt road was about three meters across. Sayama stood atop the bulge in the center created by the ruts on either side.

As he wiped sweat from his brow, the RV's headlights reached him.

Sayama took a step back while in the center of that light.

However, the family showed no sign of noticing him. The RV continued to approach at the same speed.

…The wall.

They passed right through it. However, the RV changed.

It became a pale shadow.

It was so thin that the scenery beyond it was easily visible through it. The people inside were the same.

"…!?"

As Sayama stood in the center of that mountain road, the pale shadow of the RV passed through him. He only felt a slight shadow. It produced no wind or sound.

Sayama let out a sigh without even turning around.

"What is going on?"

…That RV will likely drive up to the main road and eventually drive beyond the invisible wall once more.

And what lay beyond that wall was of course the everyday world.

It was only this space that was twisted. He was sure of that now.

Sayama suddenly crouched down. He spotted a nearby stone on the ground.

He picked it up.

Sayama then looked at the spot where the stone had been. A faint shadow the exact shape of the stone lay there.

It was so faint he could not see it without paying very careful attention.

Sayama replaced the stone and muttered, “Are the objects in this space the actual objects? Or are they the shadows?”

He did not know.

Sayama shook his head lightly and stopped arguing about it in his head. His current priorities lay elsewhere.

He took a breath. But then he froze in place.

He had heard a noise. He had heard heavy footsteps and a small cry in the distance.

The cry was the same voice as the scream from earlier.

“That person is still alive,” muttered Sayama as he looked forward.

He saw a slope. It was the slope he had climbed to distance himself from his enemy.

However, he took in a deep breath and began running down that very same slope.

Dusk was already turning to night.

Night also enveloped the near-deserted school.

In the 2nd year general school building of Takaakita Academy, Ooki was in charge of locking up for the night. She was on the western edge of the first floor hallway. Specifically, in front of the emergency exit.

Kinugasa Library was located on the same floor. About four classrooms-length of the hallway had been turned into a storage area.

"What is this, a lawless zone?"

The large Kinugasa Library took up the length of four classrooms and the hallway had not escaped the power of its books. Bookshelves and other shelves were lined up along the walls of the hallway and towers of books were piled up here and there. To make it as far as she had, Ooki had been forced to weave around and jump over the piles of books. The hallway had become a sort of labyrinth.

No books or shelves were located near the emergency exit at the back, but that was only because the books and shelves were often brought in through it.

Ooki turned the key for the emergency exit to lock it. For an instant, she caught a glimpse to the east through the emergency door's window. The eastern mountains were outlined in crimson, but the sky above created a gradation from purple to black.

"I hope this is okay…" she muttered before turning her back on the window.

She did not want to stay in that deserted labyrinth of books for long. While kicking a few books out of the way, Ooki made her way through the four classrooms-length area on her way to the central lobby.

This tight skirt makes it hard to walk at times like this, she thought.

The hallway's fluorescent lights felt overly bright because of the shallow darkness of night she could see out of the northern window between two bookshelves. Her reflection in the window showed a bandage on the forehead. That was where Sayama had flicked her.

"That boy did not hold back. …It would be best if I assume that's just how much he adores me."

Just as she muttered that, a door opened to the side.

"!"

She gasped and turned around. As she did, her heel caught on a pile of books and she fell backwards.

"…Ah!"

Her legs flew up and her head fell to the floor…or it would have. However…

"My apologies," said a low and relaxed male voice as a black gloved hand caught her falling back.

As soon as she realized she was being supported, her vision rotated around vertically.

Her feet were brought to the ground and she stood on her own.

"…"

Ooki did not quite understand what had happened. Only the word "rotation" floated up in her mind.

"Um…" she muttered as she looked up at whose hand was supporting her waist. "Siegfried-san?"

"Are you okay?"

It was a tall elderly man who answered with that question. His broad-shouldered frame was contained in a white shirt, a black vest, and black trousers. He was bald, had a white beard, and his blue eyes were looking down at her.

Siegfried silently removed his right hand from her waist and brought the white cup in his left hand to his mouth. The aroma that reached Ooki told her it was coffee.

Ooki bowed while trying not to be too distracted by that scent.

"Th-thank you very much. What was that where I spun around?"

"It is similar to what you call aikido in Japan. More importantly, I am glad you are okay. Are you locking up ?" asked Siegfried before his gaze moved to Ooki's forehead. "I apologize for asking so many questions, but what is that bandage?"

"Oh, just something I received from a student earlier."

"School violence? We cannot have that. I will teach this student a form of punishment passed down for generations. No matter how stubborn they may be, they will confess to being a filthy witch in just one blow."

"Why is everyone around me like this?" muttered Ooki under her breath before shaking her hand from side to side. "No, no. This boy worked his way up quite high in karate, so I think this was unintentional. Also," she scratched at her head, "it was done with mutual understanding between teacher and student. I was perfectly fine with it."

"I see. Then I have no right to speak out against it. …I suppose everyone has their own preferences."

"Oh, um… I am not sure I would put it that way, but whatever. What are you doing here, Siegfried-san?"

Siegfried pulled a single piece of paper from his breast pocket. He took another sip from his cup and then spoke.

"Some people needed help finding some data. Part of my job is providing help for those searching for data. Could you perhaps help me? There is a book titled 'The First Plutonium' somewhere in this hallway."

"No, no, no, no, no," said Ooki as she took a step back.

With a word of parting, she bowed and walked out to the central lobby that was actually quite small. She climbed the stairs to lock up on the second and third floors.

From the central lobby, it became clear how dark the school building was even with the fluorescent lights. The building was designed to only be used during the day.

"How scary," sighed Ooki as she turned on the lights for the stairs.

The light green staircase lit up, but the white fluorescent lights felt somehow cold.

She then heard Siegfried say, “I already locked up the second floor. If you trust me, you can skip it.”

“I trust you!” she replied thankfully to the man who was hidden from view by a corner of the hallway.

She then headed on up.

She knew that the six general education school buildings and the faculty building had been built before the war.

“The library was built like that by the founder, Kinugasa Tenkyou.”

It had originally been prepared as the research archive for Izumo Aviation Institute’s General Tokyo Facility that was being built at the time. However, Takaakita Academy had been born as a means of creating skilled future personnel.

Ooki thought about the staircase she was currently walking up.

“This was built over 70 years ago…”

Her footsteps sounded loudly as she made it to the second floor. She left the central lobby and looked down the hallway.

She saw only darkness. And beyond that darkness was the music room to the west and the emergency exit to the east. However…

"I trust him…"

She backed up toward the staircase.

Ooki's shoulders drooped as she sighed and turned on the lights for the staircase up to the third floor. She quickly made her way up.

Once on the third floor, she found darkness once more.

As if plunging her head into the darkness, Ooki stood in the central lobby and looked toward the art room to the west and then the emergency exit to the east. She could see the emergency exit light in the distance.

"Nnn," she groaned as she turned on the lights to the hallway. The fluorescent lights came on one after another and lit up the area. However, the windows and glass on the classroom doors grew darker.

Ooki stood in the center of the hallway and scratched at her head.

"Well, I have no choice…"

Her shoulders drooped, her head drooped, and she sighed.

She headed east while meaninglessly walking as silently as possible.

But then she jumped at a sudden noise from behind.

It was a cat. A single meow had come from the western art room.

"Nyah…?" asked Ooki as if she was about to cry.

She turned toward the art room while taking a cowardly pose.

She forced strength into her shoulders and slowly sent two jabs, a straight, and an uppercut into the air.

"O-okay, come at me."

She held her breath for a few seconds. After that silence, she spoke quietly once more with her fists still at the ready.

"If you don't want to come, you don't have to…"

She received only silence in response. After a while, Ooki lowered her arms and pressed her hands against her legs. Her trembling had not stopped, but it had lessened.

"M-maybe there's a cat outside," she muttered while tilting her head and looking in the art room.

At the same moment, light cut through the darkness of the frosted glass on the art room door. It happened twice. This was not a reflection from a car's headlights. The light cut across horizontally from left to right and disappeared.

"!"

Ooki wrapped her arms around herself and crouched down. After a moment, she reflexively covered her ears with her hands.

"I-it's okay, it's okay. Th-that was just a mysterious phenomenon."

After realizing what she had said, Ooki let out a cry and shrank down even further.

She decided to return to the stairs. It was only about four meters away. She removed her hands from her ears and began crawling on her hands and knees. She kept her gaze down so as not to look at the art room as she took one step and then two.

As she crawled, she realized that she was acting just like a cat. She was still trembling, but she cast down her eyes in shock that she was doing this in her own workplace. She brought her right hand forward in place of a front paw and could not help herself.

"Nyah," she said.

But she received a sudden response from a cat behind her.

"!"

She jumped forward in shock.

She twisted around as if trying to clean the floor with her butt. With her guard raised as high as it would go, she brought her knees up to form a defensive wall.

And then she saw what had replied to her.

It was a black cat. It was sitting in the spot she had been in a moment before and it was scratching its head with its hind leg. Meanwhile, Ooki was breathing heavily while looking at the cat with her hands on the floor behind her.

The black cat simply seemed to be relaxing, but she was fairly certain it had not been in the hallway a moment before.

She tried to say "when did that get in here?", but her voice spilled from her mouth more as a breath than as words. She suddenly realized she had tears in her eyes. And…

"Are you okay, sensei?"

This time, she heard a voice from behind her in the art room. It was a girl's voice.

Ooki gasped and turned around. She slowly looked up .

A single girl was standing there.

The girl wore her uniform like a model showing off the perfect method. Her platinum blonde hair was almost gray and it flowed down her back and to her legs.

She looked down on Ooki with a sharp look in her purple eyes and opened her mouth with no expression on her face.

“I apologize. You are patrolling, aren’t you? I was so focused on my work that I did not notice night had fallen . The soundproofing in here is quite good.”

“You are…”

“Brunhild Schild, a third year student. I will be the head of the general art club this coming year.”

Ooki stopped breathing momentarily when she heard the word “art”. She slowly moved her upward gaze to the west.

The art room was there.

Its door was open.

Ooki confirmed that darkness lay beyond that open door. And then someone grabbed her shoulders.

Brunhild had circled around behind her.

She leaned down as if trying to hold Ooki down.

She brought her small face over Ooki's shoulder and spoke.

"Would you like to see my painting?"

"Your painting?"

"Yes," replied Brunhild.

Ooki heard a slight waver in the girl's tone. And that waver remained as Brunhild continued.

"A painting of a forest. A deep, dark, depthless, yet abundant forest."

Sayama ran through the nighttime forest. He ran as if stabbing the soles of his feet into the ground. His legs would plunge forward through the air and his feet would come down to trample any obstacle underfoot. That was the absolute rule for running in a dark mountain.

"Who would have thought the harsh training of the Hiba Dojo would come in handy here!?"

He could hear the rustling of the trees and the cracking of someone treading quickly over branches up ahead.

Someone was being chased. Chased by that werewolf.

Hurry, thought Sayama. *I do not know who made that scream, but I have come for you.*

As he urged himself to hurry, he approached those loud footsteps. It took him five steps for every one of theirs. However, the werewolf could only run in a straight line. He focused on efficiently weaving through the trees to gain as much ground as he could.

Sayama thought. Whoever was being pursued by the werewolf likely had their own method of escaping this situation. The cut that had felled that cedar had been too

sharp to have been made by the werewolf's claws. This person must possess some kind of weapon.

"A weapon?" asked Sayama with a bitter smile.

This was Japan. A weapon that destructive would not be allowed anywhere. Nevertheless…

"But this is real. I suppose I have entered a world where I have no choice but to believe the reality before my eyes."

The source of the footsteps entered his vision. He saw a large back. It was running through the trees ahead.

Sayama reconfirmed that the footsteps and back ahead of him belonged to an enemy.

He had to hurry. He weaved through the trees while skimming as close by their trunks as he could. As he did, he scooped up two stones in each hand. He then held up his right arm so that his coat spread out.

"I suppose I have to say goodbye to this suit today…"

As he spoke, he could now see both the werewolf and the person running from it.

…A girl?

He saw a single girl running.

She appeared to be about the same age as him. Her long, soft, and black hair danced about as she fled. She wore a white and black outfit that resembled a dress and in her right hand was…

"A fluorescent light?"

She held a white staff almost two meters long. The side of the upper end had a long cylinder attached that looked a lot like a fluorescent light. It produced a slight bluish-white afterglow that lit up the girl.

As the werewolf ran, it stretched out its arm toward the girl. She swung the staff as if to shine the afterglow on the werewolf.

Sayama heard a sound similar to a spray of water and saw the werewolf's arm repelled.

He did not understand how it worked.

However, the staff the girl held was definitely the weapon Sayama had assumed she had.

As he ran, Sayama suddenly muttered, “Not good.”

He remembered running through this area.

Several depressions that had once been small streams cut across like stitches.

Sayama poured strength into his legs and ran forward.

At the same moment, the girl looked down as she ran.

“…!”

She let out a meaningless gasp and her slender body flew as if it had been struck.

She had not tripped; she had intentionally jumped.

However, the enemy did not overlook this opportunity . It let loose an attack from the left as if scooping its claws up toward the target that had lost her balance in midair.

The girl swung the staff to hold up the afterglow.

But it was too late.

With the sound of cloth tearing, her body was knocked away.

At the same time, a wind blew through, rustling the leaves of the forest.

Chapter 3: Her Song

Chapter 3

“Her Song”

One, two, three, the words are uttered
The words are those of a singer
But only once they are heard do those precious words become a song

One, two, three, the words are uttered

The words are those of a singer

But only once they are heard do those precious words become a song

Ooki saw a painting of a forest.

A space had been opened in the center of the art room. The easel standing there held a large canvas giving off the scent of turpentine. The canvas contained the forest painting.

"Have you repainted this a whole bunch of times?" asked Ooki.

Brunhild turned around next to the sink at the window of the art room.

While washing the brushes she said, "I have altered parts and painted over areas countless times. But I am not 'repainting' it as it is still incomplete."

"Is a painting not complete when you paint it once?"

"It can change depending on the materials and methods used. And on what you decide is its completed form."

"Hmm," replied Ooki as she looked at the forest contained in that rectangular frame. It was a work in progress, so some areas were not fully painted. However, a depthless black forest spread out within the canvas.

For an instant, Ooki felt like she was being sucked inside, so she frantically straightened up.

"If you get too close, you will get paint on you."

Brunhild dried her hands and the brushes with a dark stained towel.

"Where are the other club members?" asked Ooki toward the girl's back.

"I am the only one that remained behind for spring break and wishes to paint enough to stop by the art room . I have been making use of the space due to its excellent soundproofing."

"Hmm," replied Ooki again as Brunhild pulled a small round case from her skirt pocket.

It was hand cream.

Ooki let out a sigh as she watched the back of that girl rubbing the cream on her fingers.

She looked down and found the black cat looking up at the painting.

Wondering if the cat could understand what it was looking at, Ooki followed its gaze. One section of the vast , deep forest remained untouched. It had no color and the material of the canvas was exposed.

"What will you be putting in this blank area?"

"A cabin." With her back to Ooki, Brunhild nodded to herself. "Yes, a forest is not just a collection of trees. A forest is a forest because it is a place for people. It is because of the people in the forest that the trees are not just a collection; they are counted and remembered. Forests-…" She trailed off for a moment. "The kanji for forest was the first I learned in this country. I think it is an excellent representation."

"I see. So you're the outdoors type… I like green things too. Like celery."

Brunhild's fingers stopped moving at that last comment, but Ooki carefully examined the empty spot on the canvas without realizing the meaning behind that. A careful look showed a small cabin and four people drawn in charcoal. Three of the people were visible. An old man read a book inside the cabin and a girl and a woman played with a bird in front of the cabin.

The fourth person was probably a man, but he was hard to make out. The sketched lines had been roughly erased.

However, the direction of the woman and girl's gazes showed that someone was definitely sitting there.

"Brunhild-san? Who are these people in the cabin?"

"A forest needs people, but those who live in the forest are those known as hermits, their apprentices, and those seeking their protection. …A hermit is the same as a wise man. Those who lament the world live here."

"I see," said Ooki as she straightened up and thought while keeping her gaze fixed on the painting. She then

whispered, “So you like making up stories to go with your paintings.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, no. Nothing at all.”

Ooki looked over and found Brunhild looking toward her.

The girl’s eyes were narrowed as if staring intently at something.

“Sensei, something has been bothering me. What is that on your forehead?”

“Oh, this? That was thanks to a student.”

“School violence? That is not good. I will teach you a disciplinary method my older sister taught me. Even the biggest fool will regain his obedience in a single strike.”

Why is this school filled with people like this? muttered Ooki in her heart.

“No, no. He is already plenty obedient. If he had been serious, it would never have stopped here.”

"This school has a student that violent?"

"Violent? No, he isn't violent," said Ooki. A small smile floated up on her lips. "In his second year of middle school, he advanced to the openweight finals for student karate, but he lost after breaking his fist. Afterwards, his corporate blackmailer grandfather taught him all sorts of things and he now constantly has the top grades in the school. If I had to say he has a problem," she took a breath, "it is that his knowledge of his abilities and his knowledge of just how much of an advantage he has prevents him from getting serious about anything. This was…not so much violence as it was a mass of strength that had nowhere to go. Okay?"

As his prey flew through the air, the werewolf moved to strike her once more.

The girl was doubled over in midair and the werewolf took a powerful step toward her.

In an instant, a third figure darted between the girl and the werewolf.

The werewolf remembered this person. It was the prey he had been pursuing before the sun set. He had lost sight of this prey after running into a wall and collapsing pathetically to the ground. The prey spread his empty arms wide as if to hide the girl. He was wearing a dark vest, but the sleeves of his white shirt showed up well in the dark forest.

The werewolf chose to use the right hand he had held up to attack the girl. He only had to plunge his claws into that boy's gut as he ran by and then throw the boy aside. His white shirt would be stained with blood which would add some nice color to the plain forest.

The werewolf made up his mind in an instant, but something else happened slightly before that.

It came from below.

Something like a wall flew toward his face.

"…!?"

The werewolf realized it was a coat.

Where? he thought. The boy had spread his arms wide, but his hands had been empty. That left only one answer.

His feet. It had to be that. When the werewolf had leapt, his focus had been grabbed by the white of the boy 's shirt as he spread his arms. The boy had placed the coat atop his feet and then kicked it up.

This slowed the werewolf's reaction time.

The coat covered his face. His pointed nose sucked in the odd flowery scent that stained the boy's clothes and he grew confused. He shook his head in an attempt to remove the coat, but it had wrapped around his head as if embracing him.

Why? he wondered just as he felt an impact run across his shins.

His body seemed to float in midair.

After Sayama swept the werewolf's feet out from under him, he saw the werewolf begin collapse, starting with the head. As the werewolf swung his arms around randomly, he grazed Sayama's left arm.

He felt pain, but turned around without checking on the wound.

The girl was what mattered, not the beast. With that thought in mind, Sayama began running alongside the rolling werewolf.

…He won't be able to get that coat off of his head easily.

Sayama had tied off the sleeves and then placed a stone in each one and in the lower pockets. If the coat struck something while spread out, the weight of the stones would cause it to grab onto its prey. Sayama had used the principle of a throwing net.

…But this only buys us some time.

He understood that well.

As he nodded, his eyes looked out on empty space. The girl had reached the fall of her parabolic trajectory.

To his left, the werewolf's leg had gotten caught in one of the depressions located here and there. The speed of his roll had suddenly increased. Sayama ignored the werewolf as the beast's giant frame struck the ground.

Instead, Sayama stretched his arm out toward the falling girl.

He was not going to make it. If the girl continued falling with such momentum, she would almost certainly be injured.

He kicked off the ground. He stretched out his hand, he stretched out his fingers, and he grabbed the girl's skirt.

"…!"

With a single groan of effort, he pulled her in toward him.

Her unconscious form fell into his arms as if she had jumped into them.

He had caught her.

He noticed she still held that long staff in her right hand. Sayama intentionally let his feet slide along the ground to brake quickly. As he did, his right arm holding her shoulders shook her slender body.

"Are you okay?"

As he stopped by tearing dirt up from the ground, she replied with an action rather than words.

Her eyelids opened slightly and her gaze moved toward Sayama.

While surrounded by a sweaty face and disheveled hair, her slightly teary eyes looked right at him. And then …

"Eh?"

Her eyes opened wide.

Upon seeing her gaze, Sayama twisted around which gave her a better look. Behind him, the werewolf had ripped off the coat over his face and was beginning to

stand. When she saw the enemy, she looked back up at Sayama.

"Y-you…" she started to say before suddenly looking down at herself.

She had only just now realized she was being held.

"Kyah!" she shouted.

Sayama glanced down to find the white and black material of her bodysuit had been split vertically. Everything from her chest to just below her navel was bared through the wide gap this opened.

Sweat covered her navel and round breasts as they moved up and down with her heavy breathing. She frantically covered herself with her hands.

Sayama unsteadily flinched back as he looked at her.

…Not good. I should have checked beforehand.

"Okay," he nodded before asking what truly mattered at the moment. "How can I defeat that enemy?"

"Eh? U-um…What are you-…?"

"This is no time for philosophical questions. I asked a single question and I seek a single answer. How do I defeat that enemy?"

She gulped. However, she gave an answer because the werewolf was getting up.

"Precious metals. Only a weapon using them will be effective."

Sayama had some doubts regarding what she had said , but he cast them aside.

He decided to trust her. She understood the situation. That was all the reason he needed.

He trusted her.

And so Sayama placed the girl on the ground. He placed her feet on the ground, supported her unsteady back, and kept his gaze on their enemy.

"What is your name?"

"…Shinjou."

Sayama rolled that hesitantly-spoken surname around in his mouth.

The werewolf stood up and leaned forward. It was preparing to run full speed for them. In another instant, that great power would be charging toward them.

As soon as he saw that, Sayama moved forward. Shinjou called out behind him.

“W-wait a second! Wait until my comrades arrive!”

Sayama’s only reply was a light wave of his left arm. A red flow fell from his fingers to the ground. The girl named Shinjou must have seen it because he heard her gasp behind him.

Her tension told Sayama once more just how limited his time was.

The grazing blow from before had been surprisingly deep.

But he did not hesitate. Even as his left arm felt oddly heavy, he took another step forward.

He fixed his left sleeve which was wet with blood, rebuttoned the cuff, and then lightly raised his right hand which now had blood on it.

He snapped his fingers and a spray of blood shot out.

"Listen."

He looked down to the chest pocket of his vest. It held two ballpoint pens.

"These are Swiss. The tips are silver. That is a precious metal. …You are in for a painful experience."

As he spoke, Sayama kicked off the ground and began running.

He ran straight forward.

He had to close the gap before the enemy began running. This was due to their difference in weight. If the enemy began running, he would not even need to stop to crush Sayama. And the girl named Shinjou was behind him.

Sayama wondered if she could fight or not. That staff she held was undoubtedly the weapon that had felled

that tree. However, she had only used it the one time. She had felled the tree and done nothing more.

Did the reason for this lie in the machine or in her?

Sayama recalled the eyes he had seen while holding Shinjou. He recalled those black eyes with thin tears running from them.

…It is the latter.

He was sure of it. She was likely a naïve person, and so she had tried to avoid having to attack.

But Sayama needed to focus on the term “precious metal”.

He was approximately three meters from the werewolf . He was not yet close enough for his attack to reach.

However, the werewolf swung his left arm up while leaning forward. He was preparing to knock Sayama out of the way and then charge on to Shinjou.

"Hmph," snorted Sayama as he reached into his vest's breast pocket with his right hand. The two ballpoint pens he had previously shown off were inside. He pulled out one of them.

"…!"

And he threw it.

He gave that projectile as much speed as he could manage from a distance of just under two meters.

He aimed for the werewolf's forehead, but the werewolf used its raised left hand to grab the ballpoint pen from the side. Bluish-white flames and then smoke burst from that palm.

The werewolf shook his right arm and threw the pen away.

His left side was now wide open.

Sayama charged in. He skillfully undid his right cuff button and pulled the other pen from his vest. He then jabbed the pen at the werewolf's chest as if tackling the beast.

It all happened in an instant.

The werewolf suddenly took an action fundamentally different from his previous ones.

It stopped leaning forward and stood up straight.

"…!?"

It had been a feint. The werewolf had pretended to prepare to run to draw Sayama in.

Sayama's aim was thrown off when the werewolf raised his body.

His right arm stabbed into empty air.

However, the werewolf's left arm was still where it was from shaking off the pen and his right arm was still where it was from straightening up. The beast had not yet taken an offensive stance. He may have evaded Sayama's attack, but he had lost his opportunity for an attack of his own.

Their situations were the same. Or so it seemed at first. However, Sayama's opponent was not human.

Sayama saw the werewolf choose a third option for attack instead of relying on his arms.

His fangs.

The werewolf opened his mouth.

Even in the dark night, Sayama could see the red of his mouth and the pale yellow of his fangs.

It all came to an end in an instant.

Sayama swung his right arm up as if stabbing into the air and the werewolf lowered his opened maw.

In that instant, the werewolf saw a single object.

The prey's right hand holding the pen moved back down as if adjusting his aim.

Useless, thought the werewolf. His fangs would tear into the prey's face before that pen could reach him.

But something odd entered his vision.

Something like a dark wet stone flew between the pen and his jaw.

As his prey swung his right arm up, this object had tumbled out of the sleeve and flown up.

What was it?

Before he could determine that, it flew into his mouth.

It tasted of blood. Of human blood.

Such a nostalgic flavor, he thought just as he realized what had flown into his mouth.

A wristwatch. It had been the one the boy had worn on his left arm.

"…!?"

His memories told him why the boy would do that.

The watch had been decorated with silver. And just before charging forward, this prey had fixed his bloody left sleeve with his right hand.

That was when the boy must have hidden it in his right sleeve. And he had thrown it using the action of stabbing with the pen.

He had done it all after predicting the werewolf would attack with his fangs.

The werewolf looked forward as he bit down on the watch that could be called a silver bomb.

He captured the boy's movements in his vision.

The boy twisted his right arm around to take a fighting stance.

He had already begun to bring his right knee up.

He pressed his left foot down to jump up.

The momentum of his jump brought his right leg straight up and toward the werewolf's jaw.

The werewolf could not avoid it.

The kick landed.

Pain and heat exploded in his mouth and his vision became enveloped in bluish-white flames.

"!"

Just as he tried to cry out, a sharp pain stabbed into his chest thanks to the second pen. His body became even further enveloped in fire.

He could hear the boy asking a question.

"Was that a painful enough experience?"

The girl named Shinjou uttered a single short statement after seeing what had happened.

"No way… And against an enemy like that?"

However, she immediately held up her staff. She did not aim the point at the enemy; she instead aimed the side with the fluorescent light toward the enemy like it was a bow.

Before her, the boy stumbled backwards a few steps after landing. Beyond him, the werewolf's head and

chest were enveloped in flames. The boy tried to stand up tall, but his knees gave out underneath him and he collapsed to the ground.

Meanwhile, the werewolf could still move.

"…!"

Even after being turned into a bluish-white torch, the beast howled up into the sky and took a step forward.

The boy managed to stand up, but he seemed to be twisting his body around to do so. Also, his left hand was still hanging limply at his side, his back was arched, and his breathing was visibly erratic.

Shinjou tightened her grip on her staff. She had to hurry. If she did not, she might lose that boy.

She looked at the center of the grip. A narrow chain with an anchor attached hung down from the hole there.

If she grabbed and pulled that anchor, the dynamo inside would supply power to the fluorescent light. The concept that precious metals possess power had been added to the conditions of this space. That was why the dynamo within the staff was created from consecrated

silver sheets and gold coils. And the light emitted by the fluorescent light powered by that dynamo was…

"A sacred light created from mercury."

It was fairly weak as far as the powers of precious metals were concerned, but reflectors were used to focus the light. That gave it enough power to act as a blade within the effective focal length.

With swift motions, Shinjou grabbed the anchor and stared forward.

The boy had taken a fighting stance and the werewolf had swung up his right arm. That sight caused Shinjou to cry out reflexively.

"No!!"

The werewolf turned toward her.

And she saw emotion.

She saw the emotion on the werewolf's face.

Sayama saw the werewolf move.

…It can still move!?

A bitter smile appeared on his face when he realized his thought was one of admiration rather than fear or surprise.

I see, he thought. He was gasping for breath, but his thoughts raced on.

He could do this. He could still do this.

Do what? he thought, but the answer was already prepared within him.

He would get serious.

He had yet to reach that point. All he had done at this point was perform a simple feint and exchange injuries.

It started here. He felt this was where it truly began.

The instant he got serious, the answer came to him. He simply had to knock down the enemy before him and be the last one standing. He could use any means necessary. After all, the beast before him was his enemy.

He would truly try to crush this enemy. That was the lesson his villain of a grandfather had driven into him again and again.

He began to move. In order to carry out his act of evil, he took an instant to check on the ballpoint pen he had just stabbed into the werewolf's chest.

His next action could begin once he kicked it up or otherwise got it back into his hands.

Or so he intended.

But before he could, he heard the metallic sound of a staff being held up. Soon thereafter, he heard Shinjou's voice.

"No!!"

At the same time as he heard that still word, Sayama saw a single emotion.

As the werewolf looked over Sayama's head, the beast's face definitely twisted.

Protest, indignation, resignation, grief, anger, and pity.

The werewolf's face twisted into an expression that was simultaneously all of those and none of those.

When Sayama saw this expression, he stopped moving briefly.

…Is it really necessary to crush this beast's emotions?

That thought came to him. He wondered if his evil was just or not.

He was inexperienced.

However, Sayama clenched his teeth and moved.

Shinjou had also seen the werewolf's expression.

When she realized that expression had been caused by her and the weapon in her hand, a quick "ah" escaped from her lips and her hand pulling the anchor suddenly stopped.

She saw the boy move. He tried to deliver a right kick.

However, it was too late. She was unsure if he would make it in time.

If the werewolf moved with all its strength, the boy and his attack would be crushed.

If she did not pull the anchor, she might lose the boy.

She had to shoot.

But she hesitated.

She did not know why she hesitated. She only knew that this hesitation had existed in her heart all this time.

Was there no better way? Was there some method other than fighting like he was?

Was there some method that would not require either of them to be lost?

She could not think of anything. As she became aware of her own inability, she saw the boy take his belated action.

When she saw his action, Shinjou compared him to herself.

…*He is different.*

And then the werewolf's body trembled slightly. This was the beginning of an action. She could not tell if this was an advance indicator of the beast swinging his right arm down or of some other action.

"N-no!" cried Shinjou.

And yet she was unable to pull the anchor. She could see the fingers holding the anchor trembling. She could not suppress the trembling. It grew so bad that the chain shook and rattled.

"…!"

With a voiceless breath, Shinjou tried to pull the anchor.

In the next instant, her fingers slipped from the anchor .

The chain rattled as it fell slack.

"Ah…" she said as her eyes opened wide and tears poured out.

And suddenly, the werewolf was pierced by a white light from the side.

Shinjou saw it. A white light about ten centimeters wide shot through the center of the werewolf's torso from left to right.

It had been a sniper shot.

As a light sound of flesh being struck rang out through the air, the werewolf stopped moving.

Finally, the beast's body tilted backwards.

And the werewolf looked up into the sky. Into the night sky of the dark forest.

"…"

A cry escaped through the fangs in its opened maw and shot into the sky. This cry could be taken as one of protest or one of great emotion.

And then the werewolf moved. He moved his sharp claws. He held his right hand up to his neck and made a single horizontal jerk.

The sound of the flesh being torn was the same as the sound of a fibrous material being cut.

The sound of blood spilling out was the same as the sound of bubbles being formed.

After those two sounds and a stream of blood burst out, the werewolf collapsed.

An unreserved sound of flesh striking the ground rang out.

The beast's giant form lay sprawled out on the ground while still wrapped in bluish-white flames.

When he saw that, the boy lowered the leg he had swung up for a kick.

The train bound for Okutama began to move.

It had already grown dark outside the window and the black of the mountains and the blue of the night sky were visible through the window that reflected the inside of the train.

The train was near deserted. Only two figures could be seen reflected in the window. One was a white-haired man wearing a black suit and the other was a white-haired girl wearing a maid uniform. The man was named Itaru and the girl was named Sf.

The girl held a metal cane on her lap.

"Do you think the situation has ended by now?"

"Probably. My old man said the preliminary negotiations with 1st-Gear would be held the day after tomorrow, but…"

"There have been a lot of deaths."

"Yes. What do you think?"

"This can be used to our advantage in the negotiations."

Itaru gave a bitter smile.

"You're supposed to say we will not let their deaths go to waste, you idiot. Try to remember to put it like that when speaking to others."

"Tes. But that representation makes it difficult to arrive at the original meaning."

"That is supposedly the entire point. And I used to be like that, too."

"Then I will speak frankly when it is with you, Itaru-sama. I have interpreted that as your demand."

"…You really are skilled at what you do, Sf," said Itaru as he gazed out the window. "Look, we're at Okutama. Hand over my cane. …That is my current demand."

The location Sayama and Shinjou chose to rest in was the base of the tree she had felled.

Sayama arrived while Shinjou supported him from the right side.

"I think that was a sniper strike from one of my comrades… Help should arrive soon."

Ever since that comment, she had only hung her head down. However, once Sayama sat down while leaning up against the tree trunk, there was something he had to do. First, he had to stop the bleeding from his left arm.

He took action while relying on the afterglow from Shinjou's fluorescent light.

He bit strongly into the fabric of his shirt's left shoulder and ripped it. He placed the torn sleeve on the ground and raised his left arm. He could not feel

anything beyond the elbow and the shoulder felt heavy. A close examination showed he was bleeding from one area above his elbow and one below it.

He hurriedly grabbed the sleeve from the ground. He bit one end of the sleeve and wrapped the other end all the way around from his armpit to his shoulder. He let go of the end in his mouth, tied a knot over the artery, placed a finger under the knot, and tightened it.

He suddenly realized Shinjou was watching him. Her mouth was hanging open slightly.

"Is this that surprising?"

"No, um, you just seem used to this."

"I used to attend the Hiba Dojo, a dojo a bit farther up from here. I learned this as practice there."

"Hmm," said Shinjou with a nod.

Sayama then realized she was embracing her own body and trembling slightly.

Shinjou quickly averted her gaze and spoke quietly.

"Sorry."

She held her knees in her arms. Her bodysuit-style outfit was made so the shoulders and that contained defensive properties were connected together through each of the hard points. It was similar to a modern suit of armor. Holding her knees the way she was showed off the deep-colored stockings covering her thighs. They had some sort of graphic and writing printed on them.

The way Shinjou deeply embraced her knees looked less like she was trying to hide her exposed body and more like she was trying to make herself as small as possible. While lifting her feet up on their tiptoes to bring her knees even closer, she spoke.

"I should have fired, right?"

Her tone was half questioning, but Sayama responded by leaning his head back against the tree and looking up. The shadows of the forest only made the night even darker. He could not see the stars.

"Do you think so?" he replied.

Shinjou turned toward him and lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

"If it were you…would you have chosen to fire in the end?"

"This is purely hypothetical, but I think I would indeed have chosen to fire. …Why did you not fire?"

"It isn't that I didn't fire. I couldn't fire."

"You couldn't?"

"No," replied Shinjou. "You took action in the end, didn't you? …But I didn't know what to do when I saw the look in the enemy's face. I began to wonder if there wasn't a better way."

"So you tried to make a different decision than I did."

But she could not think of anything and it resulted in being no different from simply choosing to do nothing, thought Sayama.

In the end, the enemy had committed suicide after being shot from afar.

Sayama sighed in his heart.

She had been naïve. And that had led to the worst possible result.

But that is a way of thinking I cannot copy, he thought. *And because a villain like me cannot think like that…*

"In reality, I was probably wrong and you were probably right."

"I was…right? But I might have endangered-…"

Sayama looked Shinjou straight in the eye. When their gazes met, Shinjou stopped speaking.

"Listen. You hesitated because you weighed my life against that of the enemy. That is the right thing to do."

"Th-that can't be true. All I did was freeze up because I couldn't decide which was more important."

"Anyone who judges the value of people's lives is in the wrong." He smiled bitterly. "You did the right thing. Do not try to apologize. I will demand compensation if you do."

"B-But it bothers me…"

Sayama narrowed his eyes. He looked carefully at her expression.

“Why do you always look so uncertain? It may be difficult for someone like you to survive, but you should be confident that you have survived this long by doing the right thing.”

Shinjou opened her mouth as if to say something in response.

Sayama was certain that whatever words were about to come from her mouth would be a denial of what he had said.

And that was why he spoke before she could.

“Could you lend me your lap? That will be my compensation for that first apology.”

“Eh?” said Shinjou in surprise.

Finally, she removed her arms from her knees. She hid her breasts behind those arms and hesitantly placed her knees down. She sat with her legs bent back to either side .

"I-is this good?"

Having received permission in the form of a question, Sayama moved his body down while half-sliding across the tree trunk.

When he placed his head on top of her thighs, Shinjou trembled slightly. He looked up to find Shinjou looking down with an uncertain expression.

"…Is this okay? If it isn't comfortable, just tell me. Is there anything else I can do?"

Shinjou removed one hand from her breasts and brushed up his bangs.

Sayama looked up and said, "Let's see. How about a lullaby? I am exhausted."

"Don't you dare die while looking like you're only going to sleep."

"That only happens in movies."

He gave a bitter smile and Shinjou returned it. She then looked away.

"Um…" she began before brushing up his bangs again and opening her mouth.

She began singing. Her voice wavered slightly at first, but it gradually steadied.

Sayama recognized the song. It was the hymn Silent Night.

"Silent night, holy night

All's asleep, one sole light,

Just the faithful and holy pair,

Lovely boy-child with curly hair,

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace."

As he listened to her voice, Sayama looked over and noticed some skin next to his face that her arm could not cover. Her stomach and her well-shaped navel moved shallowly in and out with the rhythm of the song and her breathing.

That movement and the sense of her breathing and pulse he could feel through her thighs gave Sayama an odd sense of peace.

He suddenly recalled his conversation with Izumo and Kazami at school.

She did indeed smell good.

As if invited in by that scent, Sayama leaned his head over and pressed his cheek and ear against the sweaty area below her chest.

He heard her say “ah” and her legs drew back slightly, but he could also hear her breathing and pulse in his ear. It was a gentle noise. He could not help but match his own breathing to hers. Sayama smiled a bit in his heart.

…You did the right thing.

He wanted to say that once more. They had not lost their breathing or the beating of their hearts. In the same way, she had not wanted to lose him or their enemy.

But the words did not come out. He no longer had enough spare energy to move.

As his consciousness thinned, Sayama tried to determine what this peace was that he was given from the warmth and rhythm of Shinjou's body. It was something nostalgic that he could not quite recall. What was it?

When the boy's eyes closed, Shinjou panicked slightly.

But when she moved, she noticed his eyebrows slanting a bit.

He was alive. He was only sleeping. When she realized that, she faintly admonished herself for thinking something so dangerous. As he slept with his ear and cheek against her body, she stroked his bangs with her hand.

His expression changed. She thought she could sense peace coming from it.

"Maybe I'm thinking too much of myself…"

Shinjou removed the arm hiding her breasts. She used both hands to reach around behind his head and shoulder and lightly embraced him. Once she actually touched him, she realized he was cold.

It's okay, she told herself as she looked down at his left arm. Because he had bound his right hand in his armpit, the bleeding had almost entirely stopped.

Shinjou's gaze stopped on his left hand. The bloody middle finger had a women's ring on it.

"…Eh?"

Surprised, Shinjou looked at her own right hand that was embracing his shoulder. She removed the glove to reveal a men's ring on her middle finger. Thinking it looked like they were following the same fashion, Shinjou smiled. He desired battle and she tried to avoid it . They seemed like complete opposites, yet they seemed a lot alike in this one aspect.

As she smiled, Shinjou belatedly realized a certain fact: she had never asked his name.

"You…"

Just as she looked at that peaceful sleeping face, she heard two sets of footsteps on the dirt behind her.

"…"

Shinjou covered him with her own body as if to hide him. After taking that precaution, she turned her head to look behind her.

Two figures stood in the darkness only a few steps away.

A slender figure held what looked like a long spear and a large figure held what looked like a long, wide sheet.

The large one spoke to her. It was a male voice.

"What's with that look? He's injured, right? Then hurry up and bring him with you."

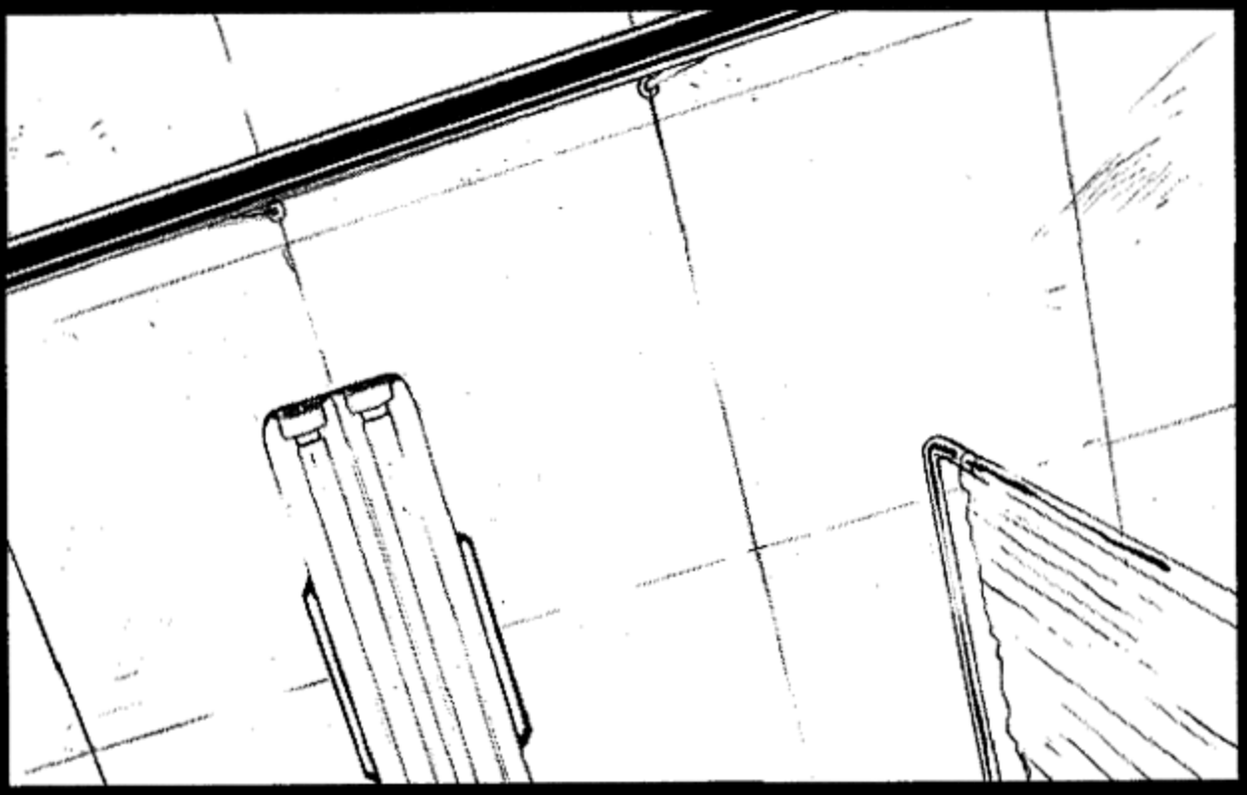
The figure took a breath.

"As long as he isn't dead, something can be done. …In this world, at least."

Chapter 4: A Mysterious Abyss

Chapter 4

“A Mysterious Abyss”



Even if offered
One cannot swallow it all at once
The truth can only soak in gradually

Even if offered

One cannot swallow it all at once

The truth can only soak in gradually

One awoke when one's consciousness floated up from the darkness and into the light.

Sayama now felt that light feeling of ascension. He then felt his vague sense of self rapidly return to a single object. He could once more feel the weight of his body.

"…Kh."

When he heard his own voice, he opened his eyes.

The only coloration his blurry vision could pick up was brightness. He was lying down. His upper body was bare and he felt hard sheets under his back.

He could see a fluorescent light on a neatly arranged white ceiling.

"Where am-…?"

A female voice cut him off.

"This is the medical room, so stay still."

An index finger suddenly entered his field of vision from the right and pressed down on his forehead. That was enough to prevent him from sitting up. And so Sayama moved only his eyes to look toward the owner of that finger.

It was a short Chinese woman. Her hair was tied back in a bun and her face held a youthful sharpness. A simple black shirt and pants covered her entire body below her white coat.

After seeing that Sayama was not moving, she removed her finger and looked to the side.

"Nijun, call Shinjou in."

"Tes."

Sayama looked toward the second voice and saw an old man in a white coat turning his back. He had been standing next to the woman. He cut across the room silently.

As Sayama followed the man's path across the room, he saw for himself that this was indeed a medical room.

Besides its two beds, the room only had a desk, a chair, and shelves covering the walls. The wall clock informed Sayama it was currently 8:30 PM.

…So only two hours have passed since then.

The old man named Nijun opened the room's door while his long gray hair fluttered slightly.

And a girl entered from outside.

It was Shinjou.

She wore a brown dress and a long white T-shirt. She bowed to Nijun, hurried into the medical room, and looked toward Sayama. Once she did, her expression lit up.

"Ah."

She blushed and covered her face with her hands.

Sayama then recalled that his upper body was bare.

While she turned her head away yet still looked his way, the woman in the white coat spoke to her without even turning toward her.

"Shinjou, please bring the shirt on the chair to him."

"But Doctor Chao…"

"Just do it. If you're too slow, I'll have to beat some liveliness into you."

The woman named Chao then faced Sayama and lightly bent up the fingers of her right hand.

Assuming she meant he could sit up, Sayama did so.

Once he did, he felt pain from his left arm and shoulder as if someone was squeezing them tightly. His left arm was wrapped in bandages both above and below the elbow and fixed in place by a thin yet hard cloth. He could move his elbow, but it felt heavy.

Chao looked down at him and said, “It seems you received the injury while your arm was bent in an L-shape. Both your upper and lower arm were torn diagonally.”

“How many stiches did it take? I want to avoid too many scars if possible.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No treatment from me is not going to involve any stitching. But…don’t move it for a while. I have it fixed nicely in place for now, but forcing it to move will mess with that.”

Shinjou was then standing next to him. She held a shirt . When she tried to hold it out to him, Chao slapped her on the ass. Shinjou cried out “Wah!” and Chao frowned.

“Don’t just hand it to him. You have to put it on him, don’t you?”

“…Testament,” replied Shinjou before sitting on the bed. She looked at Sayama and said, “Could you turn that way?”

Sayama turned his back to her. Behind him, he could hear the sound of her spreading out the shirt and of Chao ’s dignified voice.

"Shinjou, say it. You have to. Tell him you'll wash his back for him."

"What kind of services does this medical room provide ?"

"Hah. This is the medical room inside an organization known as UCAT. I am the medical chief, Chao Sei."

"Doctor!?" cried Shinjou and the sensation of the shirt pulled away from Sayama's back.

Sounding like she was smiling, Chao said, "Is there any point in hiding it? He is here to see UCAT anyway. …Right, Sayama Mikoto?"

"I believe I was summoned by IAI."

"Japanese UCAT is the hidden side of IAI. It is located deep in IAI territory and the important parts are underground. The normal IAI personnel know nothing about this special area."

While listening to Chao, Sayama felt a sudden pain deep in the left side of his chest.

He took a deep breath to suppress the pain. And then the shirt was placed over his shoulders.

He turned around to find Shinjou frowning slightly.

"We're not actually supposed to answer any questions about it," she said quietly.

"I see. So that old woman is breaking the rules."

"Yes," she nodded, but shortly afterwards her eyes opened wide in surprise. "H-how did you know that Doctor Chao is an old woman!?"

"It is just the way she talks. No matter how much younger you make yourself look, you cannot hide the years in your words. She uses similar old woman speech patterns to Old Tome in the cafeteria who was born in 1945."

"I see. That's amazing. You're the first person I've seen that realized she's an old woman."

"Well, Old Tome's speech patterns were quite characteristic. She would occasionally get your order

wrong or just stand there like someone had switched off her power, but that exciting clumsy old woman side of her was the secret behind her popularity."

"I see the two of you want salt rubbed in your wounds next time you get injured," said Chao.

Shinjou frantically looked over and said, "Eh? Ah! I-in my defense, I only called you an old woman to respond to him with the words he used. I don't think of you as an old woman at all. Okay?"

"Hm," said Sayama before turning to Shinjou. "To me, it sounded as if you were quite excited to call her that."

"Eh? Eh? D-did it?"

To respond to that question, Chao smiled slightly from where she had suddenly appeared next to the girl.

"Shinjou, if you are injured here, you can be healed right away. So what will you do?"

Shinjou frantically began adjusting the shirt over Sayama's shoulders.

After they were kicked out of the medical room, Shinjou sat with Sayama on a sofa in the hallway outside.

She took a deep breath, faced Sayama, and spoke.

"I was told Ooshiro-san would be here soon. …You had business with IAI, right?" She averted her gaze slightly. "Um, Sayama…-kun?"

After confirming his name, Shinjou felt a troubled smile appear on her lips.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time I've called you by name."

"That old woman knew my name as well. Where did you learn it?"

"Hm… I only heard it from Doctor Chao, but it seems she already knew it. But," the ends of Shinjou's eyebrows drooped as she looked at Sayama's left arm, "that will leave a scar, won't it?"

"Yes," agreed Sayama. Eventually, he asked a question while choosing his words carefully. "Do you…no, what was that beast? Do the people of UCAT always perform jobs like this?"

"Um…I can't really say."

"So you cannot respond without permission. Fine then . But there is a possibility you could receive a similar wound, correct? If you are that worried about my wound , why do you do this kind of thing?"

"There is something I want to know. That is why I do it."

She replied almost reflexively, but then realized what it was she had said.

She was not sure what she could tell him, but she had to say something to explain what she had meant.

A few seconds of silence followed as Shinjou thought. She tried to determine what she could and could not say.

"Um," she started. "I was chosen to move from my usual position to what you could call a new team. I used to have a protective role on the rear guard, but this new team is made up of a small group of elites. It works a little differently."

"What does this team do?"

"We still do not really know. The entire team has not been fully gathered yet. It seems the members who were gathered earlier know some of the details, but this was my first day."

"Will you learn what you want to know if you join this team?"

"I don't know," she said with a tilt of the head. She truly did not know. "But the person who recommended me for this unit…no, I mean team. Anyway, this person said it would allow me to be involved in the world's past . And I," she leaned back in the seat, "know nothing about my parents. I have no memories before the age of six."

"Is knowing about your parents really such a great thing?"

"Y-you only say that because you take that knowledge for granted."

Shinjou stared at him. Even she could tell her expression showed a bit of displeasure.

Thinking she needed to say something more, Shinjou opened her mouth as she watched him.

But then she saw Sayama place his right hand on the left side of his chest.

For an instant, she thought he was taking up some sort of stance.

She did not understand why, but Shinjou had a feeling that this was not good.

She tossed aside the words she had been planning to use and instead decided to change the subject. At the very least, she wanted to speak about something other than her parents.

Her gaze lowered until she saw his left hand. She then realized what she could use for a new topic.

"U-um." Shinjou raised her right hand so he could see. She wore a men's ring on her middle finger. "Do you know what this is?"

"No. It is similar to mine, but I have never seen it before. Why do you ask?"

"It is my sole possession. Besides my name, I only have this ring and a song. You heard the song, didn't you ? It is Silent Night. For some reason I knew that song. It and this ring are all I have. You wear one too, so I thought there might be some connection."

"It would be interesting if there was, but the odds are quite low. For one thing, a lot of people wear rings as fashion accessories in this day and age. Sorry, but…" Sayama glanced away slightly with a dampened expression. "Have you ever left this place?"

"Y-yes. I know everywhere in Okutama. I even go as far as Oume. It's a big city, so a train comes in every 12 minutes! That's five in an hour!"

"To help you save face, I will omit any detailed comments, but you need to get out more."

"R-really…?"

Shinjou was troubled. But then she spotted someone walking toward them from the hallway to the right.

"Ah," she said before standing up.

She had seen an elderly man with this thin gray hair swept back.

His slender body had a lab coat around it and he wore sandals on his feet. The eyes behind his glasses were bent like bows.

He raised a hand and opened the mouth below his moustache.

"Hi, there. Long time no see, Shinjou-kun, Mikoto-kun. …Do you remember me? It's Ooshiro Kazuo."

Sayama followed Ooshiro down the UCAT hallway.

Shinjou must have viewed the man as her superior because she kept her hands folded in front of her waist and did not speak much.

They passed by a few doors and several people. Four of those people were wearing white coats and one man was wearing the same white and black outfit Shinjou had been wearing in the forest.

Ooshiro would occasionally look over his shoulder and speak.

They discussed Sayama's grandfather, his funeral, school, and other topics.

But after a few minutes of walking, Ooshiro suddenly stopped and turned toward Sayama.

Behind him was a dead end with a large closed door.

A placard on the wall above the door read "Central Passageway".

"I think we should discuss the truly important things beyond here."

Hearing that, Shinjou took a step forward.

"Sh-should I really go with you?"

"I don't see why not. This is an important topic for you as well."

"Oh, okay…Testament."

That was the same word Sayama had heard in the medical room.

He asked Shinjou, “What do you mean by testament?”

“Oh, that is a special UCAT sign. From what I hear, some of the terms used here were taken from the Bible as a joke. Testament or just Tes is a sign of agreement similar to ‘understood’. The original term can refer to an agreement or a portion of the Bible.”

“I see,” said Sayama with a nod.

Ooshiro then pulled a single object out of his lab coat pocket.

It was a wristwatch. It was mostly black, but the hands gave off the light green glow of glow-in-the-dark paint.

“Now that is some terrible taste.”

“I have one, too. See, on my left arm,” said Shinjou as she showed him her left hand.

When Sayama saw a black watch there as well, he said, "Okay then. I believe in taking back what I have said when proven wrong, so should I be doing that now?"

"What do you mean 'okay then'? And shouldn't you be more concerned with making such quick judgments?"

Shinjou's annoyed response put a bitter smile on Ooshiro's face.

"You can have this as a memento of this day. It can replace the one that was broken in the fight."

Sayama took the watch and put it on. He noticed Ooshiro was already wearing an identical one.

After Ooshiro saw Sayama had finished strapping the watch on his left wrist, he opened the door behind him.

The metal door opened inward.

Beyond the now empty space was a passageway with closed shutters on either side.

"This passageway runs through the center of UCAT. But right now…"

Ooshiro entered the passageway. Sayama stood before the door alongside Shinjou before setting foot inside.

Once he did, he heard a voice.

—Your feet are on the ground.

"?"

Sayama tilted his head in puzzlement. He felt as if he had heard a few other voices after that first one, but he had been unable to make out the others. He only recalled that he had heard a voice.

But Sayama recognized this voice.

It was the same voice that he had heard upon entering the forest that evening. However, he did not understand what it meant.

…What does it mean that I heard this voice?

As soon as he thought that, he felt a small vibration on his left arm.

It came from the wristwatch he had been given. He felt as if it were vibrating.

He looked down and for just an instant saw something like red writing scroll across the face of the watch.

That writing disappeared before he could read it.

“Is this a trick watch?”

It was currently ten till nine, so this was not indicating the top of the hour. Also, Sayama could not determine what that scrolling writing had been.

As question after question appeared in his mind, Sayama suddenly reached behind him.

However, he found no invisible wall. And the second hand of the watch was still moving when he looked back at it.

“Is this okay…?”

“Hm? Is what okay?” asked Shinjou while turning around.

“Nothing,” replied Sayama before stepping up alongside Shinjou.

He looked ahead and found Ooshiro standing in the center of the passageway looking toward him. He was smiling.

"Does that voice really bother you so much?"

"This evening, it was after I heard that voice that the world went insane. …But before that, I would like to discuss my grandfather. The document you sent me mentioned transferring rights left by him. What are those rights?"

"I suppose it would be quicker to start from there. Mikoto-kun, do you know what your grandfather did during the war?"

Sayama felt an ache in his chest at that question, but he took a deep breath and answered.

"I heard he was doing some sort of research and development here at IAI, the Izumo Aviation Institute."

"Yes. Then, Mikoto-kun, do you know what he was fighting against?"

"Wasn't it America?"

"Correct," said Ooshiro with a nod. "A lot of the large corporations that created weapons to use against America are still going strong today. Izumo is still expanding now just like Isuzu, Mitsubishi, and Nittetsu. However, only Izumo received no interference from GHQ[1] after the war. And it has expanded beyond its original field of aviation and into a broad range of fields such as chemistry and electronics. Why do you think that is?"

"There are rumors that Izumo was involved with the Ministry of the Imperial Household at the time. GHQ was having difficulty deciding how to handle the Imperial system, so I suppose they could not touch them. The primary developers from the other corporations saw Izumo as a safe zone and fled there. That created the foundation for the current expansions. Am I wrong?"

"You know quite a lot about this. Nicely done, Mikoto-kun."

Ooshiro happily smiled and raised his right thumb.

Sayama raised his own right thumb toward Shinjou.

"What do you think of his taste?"

"Eh? U-um…"

"Tell me what you truly think."

"I-I can't. He is way, way higher in the organization than me. I can't say it."

"An excellent answer. Very elegant."

Sayama turned back toward Ooshiro to find the man still smiling but pointing his thumb downwards. When Shinjou noticed, she poked Sayama in the side with her elbow.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"He is pointing at his feet. He is trying to brag about his smelly feet." Sayama ignored the change to Ooshiro's expression and spoke to the man. "I know I was the one who digressed just now, but when are we getting to the topic at hand?"

"Your impatience is just like your grandfather. However, I must inform you that there is a hole in your reasoning, Mikoto-kun."

Sayama frowned and tried to fold his arms but realized he could not lift up his left arm. Feeling awkward with just his right arm up, he brought it even further up to scratch at his hair.

He then asked, “A hole?”

“Yes,” said Ooshiro as he lightly spread his arms. “ You know the history of IAI quite well. However, what about the history of UCAT? Do you know why the institution known as UCAT is hidden here?” And then, “ And what do you think about that monster you fought this evening?”

“How should I know? This is the first I have ever seen of UCAT or that monster. I would like further information to base any conjectures on.”

Sayama had replied out of reflex, but he then realized the ache in the left side of his chest had grown stronger.

As if pushed on by that ache, Ooshiro’s eyes narrowed .

Meanwhile, Sayama lowered his right hand from his hair.

"How long has this organization existed? Was my grandfather involved in it?" he asked.

"I will start with your first question. Japanese UCAT was created in September of 1945. It was just after the war ended here in the old Izumo Tokyo Branch Office. As for your next question," Ooshiro nodded, "Your grandfather entered Japanese UCAT as a central member of the Izumo National Defense Department that preceded it."

Sayama's heart gave a low throb in his chest. He took half a step back as if pushed back by Ooshiro's words.

Sweat appeared on his brow, but he ignored it and asked, "What was he fighting? Was it things like that monster?"

After thinking for a short while, Ooshiro shook his head.

He took a step forward and said, "Mikoto-kun, your grandfather and the others were not fighting monsters. They were fighting ten alternate worlds lined up alongside this one. Those worlds and ours were fighting to destroy each other."

Sayama began thinking on Ooshiro's words. He contemplated what they meant.

"Old man."

"What is it?"

Sayama looked up at Ooshiro's face from below.

"I apologize for having to say this after not seeing you since my grandfather's funeral, but you leave me little choice. Do you really think anyone will fall for such obvious nonsense? What kind of person does this at your age?"

"Oh, I haven't seen a reaction so wonderfully aggravating since the day of the funeral!" shouted Ooshiro half in joy as he raised his right thumb.

Sayama tilted his head and asked, "Why do you not look remotely sorry? Is the word sorry not in your dictionary?"

"It is not that. This is the truth, so I can't exactly be sorry for telling it to you."

"Isn't this a little farfetched? I mean, alternate worlds?"

"Yes, but… Wait, am I being lectured?"

Sayama could see Shinjou looking puzzled and Ooshiro hanging his head while scratching at it.

"You are."

Hearing that, Ooshiro looked up.

"What a pain. Anyway, that was the conclusion reached. …I will explain why later. Are you willing to listen to this conclusion and how it was arrived at?"

Sayama frowned at the old man's question.

He had seen strange phenomena and met a strange beast. But these were two different things. An entire alternate world was on an entirely different level from phenomena and beasts that existed individually.

Mysterious phenomena and monsters could be explained away in some way or they could be faked with tricks or models.

However, the same could not be said for an alternate world. The scale was simply too great. However…

…Even if it is farfetched, it looks like the conversation will not continue unless I hear him out.

Sayama did not understand why Ooshiro was doing this, but he only needed to find a way to prove the old man's words were false.

Sayama also wanted to know what purpose the old man had in making him listen to this.

While feeling it was nothing but a bother, he urged the old man to speak.

"I will listen to your nonsense. So there are these ten alternate worlds. …Why were they fighting?"

Ooshiro let out a sigh.

It was obvious Sayama was dubious.

Ooshiro shrugged and placed his hands in his lab coat's pockets.

He spoke as if reciting lines he had memorized ahead of time.

"The ten alternate worlds and our own did not exist parallel to each other. They would intersect and affect each other on a set cycle. However, it was proven that all of the worlds would intersect at one point during the cycle. When that happened, the world with the greatest power would survive and the others would be destroyed in the impact of the collision."

"When does that happen? Tomorrow?"

"The collision – that is, the time of destruction – was calculated to be what this world calls 1999."

Sayama frowned.

"But that did not actually happen."

"Weren't you listening? Your grandfather and those he worked with already destroyed the ten alternate worlds." Ooshiro gave a bitter smile. "Yes. The alternate worlds meant to collide were destroyed long ago, leaving only

this world behind. Your grandfather helped destroy those alternate worlds. We refer to that war," he took a breath, "as the Concept War."

Shinjou glanced over at Sayama as she listened to Ooshiro. What Ooshiro was explaining was the first thing explained to any member of UCAT.

While some people already knew this when joining UCAT, it was necessary to explain for those who somehow ended up involved in a fight like Sayama had.

And in most cases, they gave the same reaction.

They would reject it. They would call it ridiculous.

Shinjou wondered what Sayama would do.

He had fallen silent. Shinjou waited a few breaths, but the boy continued to stand perfectly still with his right hand on the left side of his chest. His head hung down and after quite a bit of time, he opened his mouth to speak.

He gave an almost exasperated sigh and his drooping shoulders stiffened, but he said the following.

"That is a completely ridiculous story, but I am willing to believe it under certain conditions."

"Eh?" said Shinjou without thinking.

Sayama and Ooshiro both turned toward her.

She frantically waved her hands and said, "N-no, it's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Do not tell me you thought I would readily deny it."

"But you just did… You asked what kind of person could do this and you called it farfetched."

Sayama turned back toward Ooshiro, tilted his head, and asked, "Now, old man. Did I ever say those things?"

"Well… Since you have started to show interest, I can hardly discourage it. So no, you did not. You shouldn't lie, Shinjou-kun."

"A-adults don't play fair!"

"This is how politics works."

"Yes," agreed Sayama as he brought his right hand up to his chin.

Shinjou let out a sigh of relief and asked, "What made you believe him? You can't deny that it sounds like nothing but nonsense."

"True. …And unlike a normal person like me, there is a lot that is odd about the old man. You could say it is unavoidable that he sometimes suddenly cannot resist and will say or do something strange."

"You cannot say that. And how are you defining ' normal person' here?"

"Let us move on from that. Now, there is the crazy talk of a pathetic old man and there is the truth. However, to argue against this, I need proof and not emotions. Currently, the opposing side within me has no proof. And…"

"And?"

"To make this more difficult, the supporting side within me has enough evidence to indirectly believe this. Shinjou-kun, that is you."

"M-me?"

"Yes. I heard a strange voice in the forest near Shiromaru. That voice told me the crazy idea that precious metals possess power. And after hearing that voice, I heard you scream and saw a tree fall."

Shinjou brought the fingers of her right hand up to her lips.

"Sayama-kun, did you come because you heard me scream…?"

"I will leave that up to your imagination. The forest I was in was surrounded by a strange wall. Some kind of monster that may have been a type of bear was inside. And so were you. And you told me that precious metals possessed power in that place."

Shinjou nodded. She had indeed said that.

When Sayama saw her nod, he bowed his head in return.

"I do not know how your weapon worked, but my ballpoint pens and watch possessed power using precious metals. If all of that was a trick, it was a truly excellent one. You would have had to plant gunpowder or some kind of chemical on that monster. However…"

"However?"

Sayama clenched the right hand on his chin and his expression grew serious.

"Shinjou-kun, your expressions were real. That fear and tension were not a prearranged act."

"Really? What if that fear and everything else up to now were an act?"

"I apologize in advance for saying this, but are you the type of actor that can bring sweat to your skin or quicken your heart rate at will? And this was a cold sweat not brought on by exertion. Can you also freely create the thin tears of someone enduring fear rather than sorrow?"

"W-well…"

Shinjou's cheeks reddened and she loosely held her own body. He had seen all that.

Whether realizing what she was feeling or not, Sayama looked down as he gave a deep nod.

"Yes. The sweat on your bared breasts and stomach were real."

"Eh?"

"And when I rested my head in your lap, your well-formed navel was moving in and out with your slightly disturbed breathing. That is not something one can fake. Especially the tension visible in the glimpses of your breasts visible through the gaps that your arms could not quite-…! Ahh! Ahh!!"

"Don't say that!!"

Sayama drew back as a knee jabbed reflexively toward him.

"Wh-what are you doing? You certainly are a sudden person."

"That's my line. Why would you say that all of a sudden…?"

"I was simply giving evidence to the contrary of your claim that you might have been acting."

"Oh? So your relationship has already reached that level. That speeds things up," chimed in Ooshiro.

"Now then, Shinjou-kun. I believe this is when you are supposed to say Testament."

"I'm not even sure where to start correcting you there …"

Sayama ignored her and turned toward Ooshiro.

"At any rate, I have already experienced the truth once . If those mysterious phenomena or that strange monster had been tricks, I could use them to refute you, but I am currently leaning toward saying they were real. However ." Sayama stretched out his right arm. He pointed toward Ooshiro as the sleeve's fabric let out a noise. "I will admit that something strange happened, but that does not mean I can accept what you have said. Neither those strange phenomena nor that monster directly link to the

existence of alternate worlds. Not even if they were engraved with the words 'made in an alternate world'. We can prove the existence of our world because it exists. …Can you prove the existence of these ten alternate worlds?"

"Technically speaking, no. Those alternate worlds no longer exist," replied Ooshiro. "But I am sure you understand one thing: no matter what phenomenon it is, there is a point where it is only natural to assume it is no trick. The same can be said for the idea of alternate worlds. Once we pass a certain point, you will know this is something other than our world. …And I will show that to you."

As Ooshiro spoke, the shutters on either side of the passageway opened.

They made no noise. As those silent shutters rose, an office floor could be seen to the right and a large, three-story maintenance hangar could be seen to the left.

Shinjou watched as Sayama looked out at the sights to the left and right.

How will it go? she wondered. *What will he decide about this world?*

What lay before Sayama's eyes was a world with no distinction between up and down.

Both the office floor to the right and the large hangar to the left had desks, equipment, and working people on the floor. However, there was more than that.

"They are on the ceiling and walls too…"

People and equipment were there. Work was being done.

To both the left and right, the ceiling was being used as another floor.

As if it was a mirror image of the floor, desks were lined up on the ceiling of the office. The occasional decorative plant could even be seen.

The only thing that differentiated either one from a normal office was that the walkway down the center was made of covered lights which illuminated the other. The ceiling lit the floor and the floor lit the ceiling.

On the ceiling, people wearing office clothes stared at screens on the desks and typed on keyboards, walked here and there with paperwork in hand, or pushed carts full of documents.

Sayama observed those people on the ceiling.

But despite standing upside down on the ceiling, their hair did not stand on end and their feet were not attached to the floor on the ceiling.

Suddenly, a woman carrying documents on the ceiling accidentally bumped her hip against the corner of a desk.

With a look of surprise, several papers scattered through the air. They spread out and “fell” to the ceiling.

She frantically gathered them and a man on the floor directly below her called out to ask if she was okay.

Sayama saw all this.

He remained silent as Ooshiro approached one of the windows to the office floor and opened it. Everyone on both the floor and ceiling turned toward him.

"Ooshiro-san!" cried a voice.

He nodded in response and said, "Are you doing well?"

"Testament!"

Hearing that, Ooshiro moved away from the window. As the workers all returned to their work, Sayama finally opened his mouth to speak.

"What is this?"

"It is exactly what it looks like. …Now, look to your left."

Sayama ignored Ooshiro's thumbs up and looked to the left as he had been instructed.

That was the three-story maintenance hangar. The passageway he stood in was at the second story portion, so the hangar spread out for one story both above and below.

The vast floor was surrounded in concrete. In there, people were working on not just the ceiling, but the walls as well. All four walls, the floor, and the ceiling were lit by large lights protected by bars at the corners of the surfaces and along the walkways.

A large object was currently located in the center of the ceiling. It was an armor-like humanoid machine about eight meters tall.

Of all things, it was lightly raising both its arms, standing tiptoed on its right leg, and rotating.

Ooshiro opened the window and spoke over the mechanical noises coming from the hangar.

“Oh, would you look at that. A balancer test.”

The humanoid machine stopped after 15 revolutions and went down on one knee as if dizzy. The surrounding workers gathered around it and peered into the area analogous to a face.

This sight brought a wordless thought to Sayama's mind.

It was strange.

He nodded, now convinced, and suddenly opened the window in front of him.

He heard loud mechanical noises, smelled the burning scent of welding, and saw bright lights higher up.

He had seen a small shadow on the upper edge of the window he had opened. A closer look showed it was a wrench dropped on the floor on the reverse side. Most of the grip was sticking out onto the window, so Sayama could only think it was sticking to the wall by ignoring gravity.

"What is going on?"

Sayama placed a hand on the window frame, placed a foot on it as well, and prepared to jump out to the other side. But then someone grabbed his belt from behind.

"Y-you can't do that, Sayama-kun! If you fall, you'll die!"

Sayama stuck his head out the window and looked around.

Despite sticking his head out along a wall, people and equipment were standing straight on it and working.

After watching those workers standing and walking along the wall, he spoke to Shinjou behind him.

"Sorry, but please let me go."

"Y-you can't rush this!"

"I have made up my mind. I must go to the other side!"

"You can't! It's too soon! Please rethink this!"

"Do you think this is a training ground for jumping to your death? This may only be the second floor, but you might be injured if you fell."

Hearing Ooshiro say that, a question entered Sayama's mind. He stopped moving and asked it.

"Why do you think I will fall? They are standing on the other side of this wall, so-…"

He trailed off.

A giant trailer drove along the vertical floor from the left.

It was driving relatively quickly for the small area.

The instant of rumbling, wind, and shadow caused Sayama to duck back a bit as it passed by overhead.

The vibration caused the wrench sitting on the edge of the window to shake and drop down toward him. As he saw the wrench graze his face and fall behind him, Sayama frantically ducked back into the window.

He climbed down from the window frame and onto the passageway floor as wind from the trailer blew in through the window. The wind stank of exhaust, but it also contained a slight citrusy aroma.

Sayama took a breath. He then looked through the window at the humanoid machine standing up on wobbly legs.

"But…" He recalled the school newspaper attached to the wall in the school building. "I thought those things could not walk properly? Is your actual technology at this level?"

"Do you think we purposefully send out weakened mechs to be destroyed so no one will know what level of technology IAI has? Why would we need to put on such a performance? Mikoto-kun, the machine used in the article your school published was a God of War with the same design as this one. However, it was piloted remotely."

"That machine was unable to walk without destroying itself, so how can this one move like this? Has the durability of the metal or gravity been altered?"

"I am glad the thought occurred to you. …What if we could control gravity?"

Sayama frowned. It sounded ridiculous, but a similar phenomenon could be seen before him. People were standing and working on the ceiling and walls. He looked at them and himself, but then he realized something that did not add up.

"Wait… You said I would fall when I placed my foot on the window frame before. If you could control gravity , I would stand on the wall instead of falling when I exited the window."

"What if we were merely mistaken?"

"Then tell me this: what is that?"

Sayama pointed at the window to the office floor. A single object sat on the window directly opposite the one to the hangar Sayama had opened.

It was a wrench.

It sat on the window as if that window were the floor.

Sayama approached the window and touched it. A few people working beyond the window noticed him, but Sayama ignored them and spoke.

"We feel no attraction from this window. But this wrench does. …Is gravity being individually controlled for this single wrench? Does this continue until it leaves the effective range?"

Sayama approached the wrench and touched it with his hand.

The wrench immediately fell to the floor. It had been falling toward the window before, but the direction of its fall had changed. And the change had occurred as soon as Sayama touched it.

He looked down at the wrench on the floor.

"This is not gravitational control."

He thought about why Shinjou had stopped him from leaving the window and about what Ooshiro had told him. And then he thought about the meaning of the words he heard upon entering the passageway.

"It said my feet are on the ground."

As he spoke, Sayama raised his left foot toward the office floor window before him. He placed the sole of his shoe on the window.

He took a breath as he hesitated slightly.

And then he pushed off the ground with this right foot .

As he brought his right foot up toward his left foot, his body fell perpendicular to the window.

If he did not do anything, the back of his head would crash into the floor.

However…

"So this is how it works."

Sayama placed his right foot on the window. He placed it right next to the left foot already on the office floor window.

He stood.

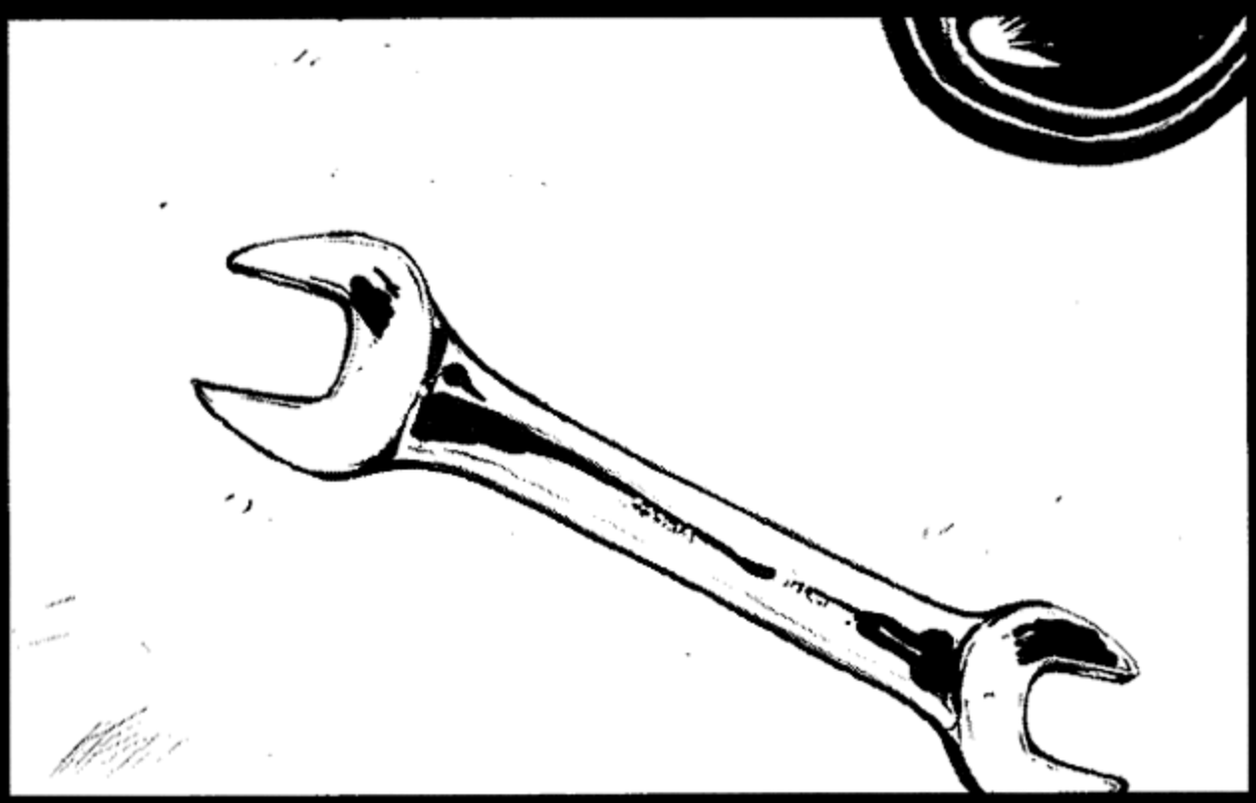
He looked around. Shinjou and Ooshiro stood on the wall to his left which was actually the floor.

Sayama was currently standing on the window.

Chapter 5: Notification of Ignorance

Chapter 5

“Notification of Ignorance”



What exactly is the enemy?
History? People? Common sense?
Or is it all of them?

What exactly is the enemy?

History? People? Common sense?

Or is it all of them?

Every sense in his body was telling him the window to the office floor below his feet was the ground. His left arm that hurt when he moved it was naturally hanging down toward the window. He used his right hand to touch the hem of his clothes and it was hanging down toward his feet as well.

"What is going on?" asked Sayama. "I do not know if you have the technology to control gravity or not, but this is strange. Why are only the things I am touching viewing the direction of my feet as down?"

He looked up toward the hangar above his head. Diagonal slopes had been built in places to connect the walls and ceiling. The area was arranged so that large equipment and that trailer could freely move about.

Sayama looked back down. Shinjou's gaze met his from where she stood perpendicular to him.

"Shinjou-kun, excuse me, but I would like to try something."

"Eh?" said Shinjou as she took a step toward him.

Sayama nodded and took her hand.

However, Shinjou remained standing on what was the wall to Sayama.

"So you do not fall this way."

"D-don't try such dangerous things."

"I was prepared to catch you. Do not worry."

"I'm not sure if I can…"

Ooshiro gave a bitter smile and said, "Unless you jump into the air, what is set as the ground will be constantly updated for you. In other words, the world always exists below your feet in this space. The concept related to gravitational pull has been altered."

"I see," said Sayama as he let go of Shinjou's hand. He looked toward Ooshiro and continued, "What exactly is this power?"

"Let me ask you something instead, Mikoto-kun. How do you think you could explain this power? What if you met with academics and intellectuals from around the world and asked them what power can alter the world so conveniently?"

"They would say it is a trick."

"Exactly. However, this is the truth. Now, another question. …What basis would they use for determining this is a trick?"

"That is obvious. This breaks the laws of physics."

"Yes, yes. Indeed it does. Light is bent by gravity, but with this power, light only bends according to the direction set as the ground for it. Even if the real ground is in a different direction. But Mikoto-kun, when you talk about the laws of physics, what world's physical laws do you speak of?"

"This world's physical laws."

"Then let me ask you something else. If alternate worlds did exist, on what basis would we determine they are different from our own? The terrain? The atmosphere ? The life forms? Or perhaps the culture?"

With that question, Sayama realized the answer to it all.

He finally said, "Is this what you want to say? There was a world with physical laws fundamentally different from our own. And this power we are seeing follows that world's laws!"

"Precisely. This world's physical laws cannot be applied to other worlds. A world with different physical laws will naturally overturn the very basics of the physical laws we know."

"But there have to be certain absolutes, right? Like the motion of light."

"No, no. Even that is based on this world's physical laws. When light is emitted, it spreads and continues on. But why does it do that? Why can't there be light that does not do that?"

"That is…"

"That is simply what light is in this world, right? But," Ooshiro took a step forward so their gazes would match perpendicularly, "what if light being that way was actually quite rare?"

"…"

"We only know how things work in this world. We assume the workings of this world are absolute. But what if there were a great number of other worlds and it turned out the rules of this world are great exceptions compared to the other worlds?"

"But we do not know of any other worlds, so we can only assume they would be the same as us."

A bitter smile appeared on Ooshiro's lips when he heard that response.

"True," the old man said. "But another world is another world. They are fundamentally different. What we think is simply 'how things are' and what the other worlds think is simply 'how things are' are fundamentally different."

"Are you saying," Sayama looked down at his feet, " there is a world where this is how gravity works?"

Ooshiro nodded, walked over to the opposite window, and stood on it. He looked straight up toward Sayama.

"The ten other worlds and this world are perceived as individual gears and so we refer to them as such. 1st-Gear through 10th-Gear all had their own unique characteristics. And do you know what we called this power of 'how things are'?" Without waiting for an answer, Ooshiro said, "Concepts. We called them concepts! They are a power that can control even the laws of physics. They are the ultimate reason behind everything. That is what concepts are!"

Sayama gulped at Ooshiro's words and looked down toward his feet and then around his entire surroundings.

"In other words, the concept of 'your feet are on the ground' is being used to make efficient use of this small underground space? …Was that voice I heard upon entering the concept?"

"That was a Concept Text. It is made by gathering inferior reproductions of an extracted concept. Each individual concept is very weak, but it can be heard as a voice once it reaches the level of a Concept Text. This space also has several weaker concepts added on as well, but they cannot be heard as a voice." He continued. " When an out of phase space has concepts added to it, it is known as a Concept Space. We think of a concept's identity as a variable fixed-period vibration wave that we call a string vibration."

"This just got a lot more complicated. A string vibration, you say?"

Sayama thought.

Ooshiro had said an alternate world was a world with different concepts. In that case…

"So alternate worlds are worlds with different string vibration frequencies?"

"Yes. And everything in any of the worlds has a string vibration for their world and a string vibration for the object itself. The one for the world we call the parent string vibration and the one for the individual we call the child string vibration."

Sayama nodded and said, “So is it like a numerator and denominator? The denominator tells you what Gear they belong to and the numerator tells you what the individual is.”

“Yes. If the numerator differs, it is a different individual. If the denominator differs, it may be the same existence but from a different world. These alternate worlds are not parallel. They exist in multiple phases atop each other. According to the records, a ‘gate’ that alters one’s parent string vibration is needed to move to and from different Gears.”

Sayama then recalled the invisible wall surrounding the forest.

“This evening…was that a space that’s parent string vibration had been completely altered?”

“Not quite. If its parent string vibration had been completely altered, that space would have completely disappeared from this world. But,” Ooshiro raised his index finger, “what if only a portion of its parent string vibration was altered?”

"In that case, would the altered objects would split into two existences? The real one and the alternate world one would exist on top of each other at the same time. … And that means the objects would not disappear from reality."

He remembered the stone he had picked up in the forest. He remembered how it had left a pale shadow behind.

"So two versions of that forest existed on top of each other? I am guessing a smaller portion had the alternate world string vibration than the reality string vibration. Could I not leave because of the difference in vibration density?"

"Correct. How very wise of you. That is what we call a Concept Space. It is only a pseudo-alternate world created by borrowing a portion of an area's string vibration. Since it is still connected to the real world, it is easier to create and return to normal." As he spoke, Ooshiro showed off the watch on his left arm. "I gave you one of these before we entered this Concept Space. These watches are known as String Watches. They detect the wall of a Concept Space and alter the wearer's parent

string vibration accordingly. They are a small version of the ‘gates’ I mentioned earlier.”

“But how did I enter the Concept Space in the forest without one?”

“Someone secretly read your child string vibration. When the forest was turned into a Concept Space, your string vibration was registered so you would be allowed in. That is one thing that can be done when creating a Concept Space. And I apologize,” said Ooshiro as he looked toward Sayama’s left arm. “It seems we rushed things. We only wanted to let you experience it for yourself, but you ended up getting injured due to the inexperience of our units.”

“But it was thanks to that experience that I met Shinjou-kun and am having this conversation now.”

When he said that, Shinjou looked over from her perpendicular position with a troubled expression.

Sayama responded with a bitter smile.

“Come on down now,” instructed Ooshiro.

Sayama nodded and walked down to the passageway where Shinjou stood.

Ooshiro did so as well and looked up at the ceiling.

“Could we return just the inside of the passageway?”

The watch on Sayama’s left arm vibrated.

In the next moment, the surrounding scenery changed. The floors on either side became empty spaces.

Not only were the office desks and maintenance equipment gone, but the materials making up the walls and ceiling were gone too.

They were simply vast, dark areas without even any lights.

“This is what this underground space normally looks like. Everyone does their work in the Concept Space.”

Sayama placed a foot on the window.

However, he no longer felt any power attracting the bottom of his foot to the window.

He also realized the wrench that had fallen to the floor was gone.

They had returned to reality.

Sayama let out a breath and looked around the empty space.

If he paid very close attention, he could make out the faint shadows of people, desks, and machinery.

Sayama then recalled the battle in the forest.

"What happens if something is destroyed in a Concept Space?"

"An object's string vibration is the concept of its very existence. If a portion of that existence concept is destroyed, no portion of the object itself is destroyed. However, its existence percentage drops. If only a dozen or so percent is used, being destroyed once will not lead to the actual object's destruction. However…"

"If an object is taken in and destroyed again and again, will the damage eventually reach the original? But I suppose that is quite a bit better than simply destroying a portion of the world. Can humans split apart so only a portion is sent into the Concept Space? That would avoid dying in one."

"It can be done, but we don't. As it is only a portion, something inside a Concept Space is an inferior version of the original. The object must rely on the information from the instant of being taken into the space, so its life force is weak and it has no ability to alter the future. … You could say the objects have no ability to grow and simply 'act' before being destroyed. That is why it is difficult to maintain a Concept Space for long. If it is not released quickly, everything inside will destroy themselves."

"Is that why there were no animals in the Concept Space?"

"When choosing the structural elements of a Concept Space, we do our best to only use terrain that does not move on its own. That also reduces the amount of data needed. …Although if you insist that plants are living

things too, I have no argument for you." Ooshiro gave a bitter smile. "And anything that will actually take an active role within has 100% of itself sent inside so that it will not destroy itself. That is what we did with the UCAT Concept Space I just showed you. An empty area is turned into a Concept Space and all of the equipment is brought in from outside. The air conditioning, water pipes, and other things that circulate were tricky."

Hearing that, Sayama looked through the windows on either side and into the empty spaces beyond. A dark atmosphere seemed to fall over him.

"I see. So shedding blood cannot be avoided. Just out of curiosity, how much of something's existence percentage must be destroyed before the object itself can no longer exist?"

"At least 50%. If more than 50% of an object's existence is destroyed, it will be annihilated. The forest Concept Space was created by accessing about 20% of its string vibration. If the same Concept Space was created three times and the forest was destroyed each time, its existence destruction would reach 60%. That would lead

to the real forest being destroyed in some natural way. I cannot say if it would be landslide, a forest fire, or a simple disappearance, but that would be its fate."

Sayama thought on Ooshiro's words.

And then he frowned.

"Are you trying to say this kind of thing has actually happened before?"

"I will leave it to your imagination what might have caused the natural disasters that occasionally happen around the world. But can you guess where these rules lead us to?"

Sayama recalled one of the first terms he had been told here.

"You mentioned the Concept War before. Is that it?"

Ooshiro nodded.

"If a Gear loses over 50% of its concepts, it will be destroyed. The Concept War took the form of stealing each other's concepts."

"So the concepts were extracted and stolen from each Gear… Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes. And the concepts of each Gear were taken to this world in the form of a Concept Core that has even greater density than a Concept Text. In other words, all the other Gears had their concepts stolen which destroyed them."

"I see," responded Sayama. "Is it possible to create a new concept?"

"Let me just say that it was researched at one time. There were…no successes. All we can do is make inferior reproductions. That is why a Concept Core is needed as a master for creating Concept Texts." Ooshiro smiled, spread his arms, and looked out across the floors to the right and left. "Do you understand now? Your grandfather was a part of UCAT once it was formed after the war. UCAT fought the ten Gears with different concepts and destroyed them all by taking their concepts. And currently, our primary mission is to protect, negotiate with, stop the terrorist attacks of, and conceal the existence of the refugees of the other Gears. However …"

"However?"

Ooshiro smiled slightly at that question. He paused for a few seconds before replying. The conversation finally arrived at what Sayama's grandfather had left him.

"This last remaining Gear is known as Low-Gear because it has nothing. And it is currently facing a crisis. As the victors of the Concept War, we must overcome this crisis by negotiating with the survivors of the ten other Gears and having them cooperate with us." He took a breath. "That is the Leviathan Road. …And your grandfather said to give you the right to be the representative of Low-Gear."

A certain staircase could be seen at night.

The green painted wall and the white steps were illuminated by the light positioned above the emergency exit at the top of the stairs.

The staircase was located in the second year general school building of Takaakita Academy. It led up to the rooftop.

Two sets of footsteps could be heard walking up the stairs.

The two figures unhesitatingly ascending were a human and an animal.

The human was a girl with swaying gray hair and wearing a blazer. The animal was a black cat.

It was Brunhild, the head of the art club, and her black cat.

The footsteps quickly reached the top of the staircase. The door was unlocked and then opened.

With the sound of wind whipping into the building, the two figures dashed outside.

They were not met by the darkness of night.

They saw light.

"…!"

Brunhild stopped moving. She looked up expressionlessly into the sky.

It was bright. After exiting the dark staircase, she was faced with the bluish-white moon floating in the sky.

As she stood on the rooftop, the vast night sky and the moon could be seen overhead.

And the wind of the night blew about.

The feel of the breeze led Brunhild to spread her arms and take in a deep breath.

Such cold air, she thought while brining that air into her lungs.

"This Gear is filled with so many unnecessary things," she commented.

She placed her right hand in her uniform pocket and pulled out a single object.

She held a small blue stone the size of her fingertip between the index finger and middle finger of her right hand.

While holding the stone, she rotated her arms. She held her left arm forward and her right arm back.

The black cat at her feet jumped up onto her left arm.

Brunhild moved her right hand. She made a fist and wrote something in the air using the thumb. And then…

"We were delayed by that intrusion, but you have work to do," she said expressionlessly before snapping the fingers of her right hand.

With a clear note, the cat's form changed. It bent and came apart as if made of thread.

"Now, go. Notify us of our hated enemy's condition and inform our comrades of the situation. You are the tidings carried by the black wind."

After coming apart, the black cat became wind.

A black wind.

Leaving her left sleeve rippling, the black streak of wind danced through the nighttime wind and shot to the west. It waved, stretched, occasionally accelerated, arced, and then arced back as it soared through the night sky.

Brunhild watched the wind leave before lowering her arms. She opened her expressionless mouth and spoke.

"They are beginning to take action, so the time has come for us to respond… We were the first of the Gears to be destroyed. It is time we stopped hiding." She nodded. "The survivors of 1st-Gear must stop hiding!"

Chapter 6: Their Impressions

Chapter 6

“Their Impressions”

Fitting and unfitting
To be together
Is a complex sort of restraint

Fitting and unfitting

To be together

Is a complex sort of restraint

In a certain room, one could look out into the mountains and valleys of Okutama at night.

The aboveground portion of UCAT was disguised as an IAI transportation administration building. This room was on the top floor of that building.

Specifically, it was on the eastern end of the fifth-floor of that large white-walled building hidden in the mountains.

The private room was five meters square and had a single light and a single air conditioner on the ceiling. The walls and ceiling were white, so not a single dark color was visible. However, the floor was covered with disorderly shadows.

Books, documents, cardboard boxes, and packaging were piled up all across the floor. The area around the desk by the window was especially bad. The desk had several cluttered strata piled atop it.

A white-haired man was sitting between the desk and the window. He was wearing a white coat and was the man named Itaru that Sayama had met on the train.

He was sitting shallowly in a wooden chair with his sunglasses still on.

His hand was moving. He was folding a piece of paper .

He was making a paper airplane using a document from a pile on the desk. The text at the top revealed it had been sent to Ooshiro Itaru.

“This is how you deal with documents not even worth looking at.”

Ooshiro Itaru tightly folded one end of the paper, held it up, and aimed. He aimed at the room’s white door.

The pile of documents on his desk was in the way, so he had to lean out a bit.

And he threw it.

The sharply pointed paper airplane soared in a straight line toward the door.

But then the door opened and a girl entered.

This was the maid-uniform girl named Sf. She held a silver tray in one hand.

“Itaru-sama. I have brought your dinner,” she said just as the paper airplane struck her forehead.

With a small yet solid noise, the paper airplane bounced off. It rotated around and fell to the floor that was already cluttered with documents and boxes. Several other paper airplanes were already on the ground at her feet.

However, Sf did not even look at the paper airplane. She remained expressionless.

"Could you give some sort of reaction?" complained Itaru. "Something like, 'You mustn't make even more trash! Ukii!' "

"This has only altered the form of the trash from a sheet of paper to an airplane. Also, you never continue with the same task for long, so this flight test is unlikely to last long."

"You're so boring."

"German UCAT created what was needed for the situation. According to my creator, I perfectly meet every one of your demands."

"And that is why you are boring."

"Thank you very much. It is my duty to meet your demands, Itaru-sama."

With that said, Sf walked expressionlessly forward. She lightly crushed the paper airplane underfoot.

Sf walked lightly across that paper, other documents, and even the boxes. She finally arrived next to Ooshiro where he sat at his desk.

She bowed and held the silver tray forward. It contained a soup cup and a hamburger.

"This is a soup and a hamburger. Are you familiar with them?"

"Wow, I've never seen anything like them before! … And if you are displeased about something, just come out and say it."

"Tes. …Thank you very much for the polite response."

"You really are boring. So what is it?"

"These are 100% chemical compounds. Not a single natural ingredient was used. UCAT completed the design as an experimental food and announced their research today, but it is not being sent out to be sold by IAI."

"So it is a food that does not exist in this world but has been created in this world. That would probably sell."

"I hear they have a large repertoire and the prototypes have been frozen. The head of the dining hall said they would be serving a few different patterns over the next year.'

"I see," nodded Itaru.

Sf continued, "This provides worse balance when carrying it around than with the solid foods from before. Its performance and nutritional value remain unchanged, so I must deem it an inferior product as it is more difficult to carry and transport."

"Just get used to it. The head of the dining hall is going to keep serving it until it's gone no matter what you say."

"Why? If I am not given a clear answer, I will request the previous type of food from the head of the dining hall."

"Just think of it as humans needing human food just like dogs need dog food. And the same holds even if this human can no longer eat normal food."

Without waiting for Sf to respond, Ooshiro took a bite of the hamburger. Cheese, onions, pickles, and beef were held between the buns. None of them were real.

He finished it in five bites and reached for the soup cup.

He gulped it down all at once.

"I thought it would be too hot, but that wasn't bad."

"Its temperature was quite high, so I stuck my finger in it on the way here to cool it. My internal temperature is kept low."

"You really are a machine that meets my every demand. If I could return you, I would do so in a heartbeat."

Saying that, Itaru returned the soup cup to the tray and wiped his hands on Sf's apron.

He glanced up at her and said, "Not even a displeased look? I'm dirtying your equipment."

"Do not worry. This apron is meant for you to wipe your hands on. I also have one for outings, office work, cleaning, receptions, sleep, and ceremonial occasions. This one functions as a disinfectant, so feel free to use it."

"You are truly an amazing machine. Where can I send my thoughts and requests? Please tell me."

"Tes. Please send any mail to the Sf assistance official within German UCAT."

"…You really don't know what a joke is, do you?"

"I will interpret that as a request, Itaru-sama…Oh." Sf bowed and leaned forward. She adjusted the position of Itaru's metal cane leaning up against the chair. Then, "I will be going."

She turned to leave the room. Itaru called out to her.

"What's my old man doing?"

"Kazuo-sama was at the first floor's central entrance not long ago. He was with Shinjou-shi," while still expressionless, she tilted her head slightly, "and Sayama Mikoto-shi who we saw on the train. It appeared they had discussed the Leviathan Road while underground."

"Do you know the details?"

"Tes. Sayama Mikoto-shi was informed that there are ten alternate worlds known as Gears, that his grandfather worked with UCAT to destroy them, that the world is facing a crisis, and-…"

"And that he is to gain cooperation from the survivors of the other Gears by engaging in the postwar negotiations known as the Leviathan Road?"

"Tes. He was told to ask Shinjou-shi for any simple information he lacked. …Also, he was handed the sacred beast Baku from 7th-Gear. It is to help him by showing him the past."

"When will that old man stop putting on airs? He should just tell the little shit to not even think about it."

"Tomorrow, they will meet at the Imperial Palace at 1: 00 PM to explain the details of the Concept War and of the current situation. The day after that, they will visit UCAT's 1st-Gear reservation for preliminary negotiations with 1st-Gear's peace faction."

"Is this Sayama brat really willing to go that far?"

"No. According to Kazuo-sama, this is all tentative. Sayama Mikoto-shi can still reject the right his grandfather has left him. He is being told to make his decision after learning what the Leviathan Road truly is."

"My old man's gotten too soft. …Although he is the one that encouraged us on the verge of death way back when."

"What is the objective of the Leviathan Road?"

"You want to know?"

"Not really, no."

"Then I'll tell you." Ooshiro Itaru picked up a document from his desk. He folded it as he said, "1st-through 10th-Gears were all created from their own unique concepts. We call those positive concepts. On the other hand, our Gear has nothing. The reason for this is simple: this Gear is created from negative concepts. Do you understand so far?"

"Tes."

"The Concept War was fought by destroying the other Gears, but do you know what basis would have been used to determine which Gears were destroyed and which one survived when all the Gears collided in 1999?"

"No."

Ooshiro Itaru gave a bitter smile and added another fold to his paper.

"When that time of destruction arrived, the Gear with the most positive concepts would survive. That was why the Gears fought and did their very best to extract and take home as many of the enemy worlds' concepts as they could. And since this Low-Gear had nothing but negative concepts, it was apparently abandoned right away."

"But despite being made of negative concepts, this Gear succeeded in destroying the other Gears made of positive concepts. …Is that why we receive so much enmity for winning the Concept War?"

"That's only one of the reasons, but yes, the underdog won. However, that result means the other Gears' concepts were brought into this Gear. They are stored in the form of Concept Cores which are masses of concepts on the level of an entire world. That goes well beyond a simple Concept Text."

The sound of folding paper continued. He made a fold that pointed up like a mountain, spread out the center, and created corners on the four sides.

"Most of the Concept Cores are stored in UCAT. If those Concept Cores are released, they will eat into this Gear's negative concepts and destroy our current ideas of common sense. However…"

"However?"

"Ten years ago, the negative concepts of this Gear began to activate for some reason. If nothing is done, this Gear will continue even further in the negative direction and be destroyed. To stop this, all the positive Concept Cores must be released to create a balance. We know this will change the world, but it is our only option." His hands stopped moving. "My old man says this is accepting the existence of the lost Gears. This world will accept the powers of those destroyed Gears and will maintain its existence using those powers. However, most of the Concept Cores were split and a portion remains in the hands of the Gear's survivors. Also, the war ended 60 years ago, so we cannot act like conceited victors and simply do as we wish with the Concept Cores . We must hold official negotiations with each Gear and gain permission to use the Concept Cores."

"And that is the Leviathan Road? To be honest, I cannot determine if this is true. What proof do we have that the negative concepts have become active?"

"Japan and you, Sf. The ones you and those like you are based on fell asleep when brought from 3rd-Gear. Now, tell me when they awoke."

"…December 25, 1995."

"And what happened in Japan on that day?"

Sf immediately replied, "If my memory is correct, the great Kansai earthquake."

"Yes, you are correct. That was one aspect of this. And the Concept Cores must have had some sort of reaction too because their concepts began to leak just a tiny bit into this Gear. That is why those girls became able to move ever so slightly."

"…"

"The negative concepts are even now growing more and more active. It has been predicted that their activity will reach its critical point at exactly ten years after it

began. In other words," he powerfully added a fold, " December 25 of this year."

Ooshiro Itaru's hands stopped there. He placed what he had folded atop the pile of documents on his desk. It was a square with one end pointed. It had a square protrusion on the top.

Sf looked at it and asked, "Is it a boat?"

"Does it look that way to you? No. It is a tower. Look at it like this."

He pressed down on the back of the square to stand it up. It was a tower stabbing straight up to heaven.

"It all begins here."

Sayama and Shinjou left the white-walled UCAT headquarters which was disguised as a large IAI transportation administration building. They then walked toward the main entrance through the IAI grounds.

He had left his cell phone with UCAT along with his torn coat so they could be inspected after the battle. Sayama called someone from back home using the cell phone he had been provided with.

A car would arrive for him in half an hour. He had to make his way out of both UCAT and IAI grounds in that time. However…

"This place is much larger than I expected. Maybe we should have waited for the bus," Sayama said.

"I-I agree. I thought I wanted to walk for once, but that may have been a mistake," replied Shinjou.

The UCAT area was filled with 3000 meter runways and large hangars that were visible under the nighttime lighting.

A kilometer long valley could be seen partway across and it was what hid UCAT from the surrounding areas. The IAI area on the other side had many more lights and the buildings on the surface were much larger.

Sayama and Shinjou spoke as they walked down the central road between the buildings.

He asked her what she knew about the Concept War and the time of destruction.

He then asked her about the person from 1st-Gear who had been their opponent that evening.

"The 1st-Gear Concept Core has been split into two. 1st-Gear was a world that sat on a flat table. The first Concept Core constructed that single isolated world. The other provided the unique aspect of 1st-Gear. That is the concept that gives power to words and allows 1st-Gear to use something like magic."

"Does UCAT possess both of those Concept Cores?"

"The world construction Concept Core was sealed in a 1st-Gear sword and is stored in Japanese UCAT's western branch located below IAI HQ. But the word concept one was sealed in a mechanical dragon belonging to the radicals that fled into this world."

"A mechanical dragon?"

"It is a weapon shaped like a dragon. I've never actually seen one, though."

As he watched Shinjou shrug, Sayama decided she was not lying.

"That sounds like a weapon out of a manga or something," he said.

"Oh, I actually prefer novels. I don't read much manga , so I wouldn't know."

"Hm. It is sad to hear you denying part of Japan's culture like that. …But at any rate, if I accept these rights from my grandfather, I will ultimately have to negotiate with these radicals, won't I?"

He nodded in understanding. A break in the conversation formed and he looked around as he walked. Several giant white buildings could be seen under the outdoor lights. At this point, the UCAT buildings were nowhere to be seen.

"So UCAT is a hidden village. …The normal IAI workers know nothing about UCAT and think the area further in is an airport."

"As you were told before, the Izumo Aviation Institute 's Tokyo branch had a national defense department during the war. That department learned of the Concept

War, researched it, and became Japanese UCAT immediately after the war."

"Do you know a lot about that?"

"No. Tonight was the first I ever heard about your grandfather being a part of it all."

"Same here. That probably means my parents did not know either. They only worked for IAI. They must not have known that my grandfather had anything to do with the transportation facility over the valley."

As he spoke, Sayama brought his hand to the left side of his chest and looked toward his left shoulder. A single small animal stood there.

The 15 centimeter animal was of a type he had never seen before. Its face looked like a boar, it had a round body, and its legs had hooves.

"That's Baku, right? I've never seen it before. It can… show people the past, right?"

"The old man said it was like dreaming. Apparently, it was on the verge of dying but managed to survive due to the slight release of the positive concepts in reaction to

the negative concepts beginning to activate ten years ago. ”

When he reached out his hand, Baku drew back but then reached out its front legs to grab his finger.

“I wonder what kind of past it can show me… I suppose it could only be an unpleasant past.”

He glanced over to find Shinjou hanging her head down.

While walking alongside her, Sayama asked, “What is it?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s just… I didn’t know anything about you and 10 years ago, Sayama-kun.”

“Oh, you mean when my father headed to Kansai with the IAI rescue team and-…”

“You don’t have to say it. You don’t have to talk about your chest pains either. …It would be best if you don’t talk about it.”

“I do not mind.”

"You should. You shouldn't talk about your parents and yourself like they are strangers."

"But my parents more or less are strangers and I work to view myself objectively."

In response to his words, the ends of Shinjou's eyebrows drooped slightly as she looked up at him.

Sayama received her gaze head on.

She is likely in the right here, he muttered in his heart. Shinjou had said she had no memory of her parents. She wanted to search for them. He decided that was what led her to be right.

When Sayama had been told that the objective of the Leviathan Road was the suppression of the negative concepts, the topic had turned to the activation of the negative concepts and the great Kansai earthquake ten years ago.

And that had naturally led to Sayama's parents. Sayama had seen the look on Shinjou's face change when she heard about his father's death during relief work for

the earthquake, about his mother taking him with her and trying to commit a double suicide, and about his angina.

When she had once more asked about the ring he wore , he had given her the proper answer.

It was a memento of his mother.

She had then apologized. She had said she had not been thinking when she had said what she said in front of the medical room.

She was now looking up at him with the same expression as back then. The ends of her eyebrows had lightly lowered above her black eyes.

Before, it had been an expression of apology. But now it was an expression of admonition over speaking as if his parents were strangers. Sayama thought on Shinjou's words and expression.

…When she should be criticizing me, why does she use the expression of someone who has done something wrong?

But before Sayama could come up with an answer, Shinjou made a move. Her head drooped down.

"Sorry," she said.

Sayama tilted his head in confusion. He was the one who deserved to be criticized here.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"B-because I was being an imposition on you, Sayama-kun."

When Sayama heard those words she spoke to the ground, he spoke.

"There is one thing I hope you understand."

But then his lips produced another statement.

"That is not true at all."

After he spoke, Sayama realized what he had said.

Why had he permitted someone else to give their opinion on his pet theory?

As he felt that slight shock, he saw Shinjou look up at him wide-eyed with her eyebrows still lowered. A bit of surprise could be seen on her face as well.

She is surprised from the simple fact that someone accepted what she said, he thought.

She was serious about this.

It was related to one's memories of one's parents. That was something that she lacked.

Sayama thought as he watched Shinjou's expression change before his eyes.

Why had he allowed Shinjou's opinion?

…That is because she understands.

Her expression changed ever so slightly.

…She understands what it is she seeks.

The ends of Shinjou's eyebrows lowered and her eyes narrowed around her large pupils.

…That is something I do not have.

She opened her mouth slightly, let out a soft breath, and spoke.

"Thank you…"

Sayama nodded and looked away as he changed the subject.

"At any rate, I need to think about whether I should accept the Leviathan Road or not."

"Y-yes. If you do, it will involve more than just negotiations. You will be dealing with people as desperate as this evening."

"I see." Sayama nodded and muttered under his breath. "I wonder if he viewed me as desperate."

I was not, he thought with a sigh. It had ended before he could. And Sayama remembered what he had felt when he had been about to take action at the end. He had thought that he had been wrong.

He understood why he had felt that way.

…I am inexperienced. Even if I am wrong, I simply need to think it is necessary.

Sayama wondered when he would become the kind of person his grandfather had been.

He then recalled the battle from that evening.

"Our enemy was serious and so were you. …I have seen many different fights, but that battle was not fought hopelessly or as a game."

"According to Ooshiro-san, we will head to the 1st-Gear reservation for the preliminary negotiations the day after tomorrow. It seems they realized we are taking action, so one of the radicals tried to win over the peaceful faction on the reservation."

"So he made his way into the middle of enemy territory. …What leads people to head down such dangerous paths?"

"Well…"

"How about we leave it as 'there are things that cannot be explained with words'. According to the old man, tomorrow we will go to the Imperial Palace so he can

show me the beginning of the Concept War and the day after tomorrow we will meet with representatives of 1st-Gear's peaceful faction for preliminary negotiations. If that was all, I would not be remotely interested. However, I saw one of the radicals today. I am interested in the Leviathan Road."

…So that is what it looks like when two serious people clash in desperation.

"Utilizing force creates enmity, but there are some who will never accept it if you do not. What can be done about that? …These negotiations are wrapped in contradiction. Perhaps that is why I was chosen."

Sayama looked forward to find they were approaching the main entrance. The guard noticed them and activated the automatic gate. With a sound like rattling chains, the gate disappeared belowground.

Amid that sound, Shinjou stopped walking and asked a question.

"That is why…? Why would you have been chosen, Sayama-kun?"

Sayama stopped as well. He supported Baku who almost fell from his shoulder.

"My grandfather would boldly declare that the surname Sayama indicates a villain. He was a lone wolf corporate blackmailer. …This is a similar dirty job. Someone is needed to crush this kind of idiot underfoot."

…And they hope that person will be me.

Sayama wondered if he could manage it.

If he was to leave, he had to do it now.

"…"

Sayama fell silent. With a click of the heel, he began walking once more.

A step later, Shinjou rushed up to join him.

"Wait!" she called.

But Sayama did not turn around.

He heard Shinjou's footsteps line up beside him.

"Um, Sayama-kun. Sorry, but…"

"What is it?" he asked.

Shinjou's head drooped and she folded her hands in front of her waist.

"Umm," she started. "I just want to check one thing about what you said."

She formed a troubled smile and asked her question.

"What is a corporate blackmailer?"

"What?"

"S-sorry. I know it was a really important part, but… well…I'm not quite sure what it means."

Sayama's mouth hung open and he let out a "ha!"

…*Oh, I see.*

He did not care if his laugh reverberated in his left arm . He let loose and laughed without restraint.

Is that all it was? he thought.

Meanwhile, Shinjou's face grew red.

"Wh-why are you laughing? Is it that funny?"

"Apologies. You are an honest person, Shinjou-kun. A corporate blackmailer is someone who uses violence or influence hidden from the law to threaten corporations into giving them something in return. They bring harassment or unseen violence and if the corporation wants it to stop, they have to give them some sort of influence or a good rate in negotiations." He thought for a moment. "But unlike normal ones, a lone wolf corporate blackmailer who acts out of conviction is an idiot. When they see an enemy or evil, they wield their justice and charge in. They make no threats, they harass no one, and they cause no violence. They cry out about the injustices and fraud of corporations and wield their power in the name of justice. And they do not care who else is damaged in the process. They do not care if they are hated."

Shinjou gulped. At that moment, they passed through the main gate. The guard bowed and they bowed back.

"Will you…choose the same thing as your grandfather ?"

"Perhaps. …He truly was hated by a lot of people. When he dug up corporate injustice, not many corporations could withstand the reorganizations and dismissals that followed. He did not know the meaning of the word mercy."

"Really?"

Sayama nodded as he thought about his grandfather. He brought a hand to his forehead and sighed.

"Yes. When I was in fourth grade, I ignored a lame gag he made. That developed into an actual fistfight. What kind of person fights an elementary school boy while wearing nothing but his underwear, goes in for a cross counter, and then takes a photo to commemorate his victory? You will never find a more childish old man in all of human history. I suppose that breed went extinct recently."

"I think I see a candidate before me…"

"That would be nice," replied Sayama with a smile.

They stopped in front of the main entrance. Across the wide road in front of them was a cliff with the Tama River flowing down below and forests on the mountains and valleys beyond. The lights of the IAI hospital and employee dormitory could be seen in the distance.

While listening to the sound of the river, Sayama spoke to Shinjou.

"At any rate, I think my grandfather was hated because he was a true villain and nothing else."

"Why did he continue to do that even though it made him so hated?"

"I do not know. And to be honest, I am jealous. Why was he able to do that? …If I understood that, I could choose my own path without so much doubt."

Sayama said no more. And shortly thereafter, headlights approached from the Akigawa direction of the road.

"Is that from your family?"

"It is from a yakuza family that became indebted to my grandfather. They run a security company now, though."

As he spoke, the car pulled up. It was a large, black car . The windows were all tinted black so the inside could not be seen.

It came to a stop.

"Wah," said Shinjou as she drew back.

A man had stepped out of the driver's seat on the left.

This young man had close-cropped hair and wore a blue suit. He turned toward Sayama.

"Young master, I have come to take you home."

He bowed and looked toward Shinjou. Slight caution could be seen in the young man's actions.

He then turned his eyes toward the bandages wrapped around Sayama's left arm.

Sayama nodded and said, “Kouji, do not worry. I trust her. She…treated my wound when I tripped in the forest. Her name is Shinjou-…”

He trailed off when he realized he had never asked her given name. Shinjou picked up on this and answered.

“Oh, it is Sadame. My name is Shinjou Sadame.”

“I see. My apologies. I am Tamiya Kouji. It seems you have been of great help to my young master.”

“Eh? No, um… He helped me too…”

Shinjou took a step back, stood right next to Sayama, and whispered.

“You tripped in the forest?”

“I can hardly tell him the truth, can I?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t the one to treat you. …And this is an amazing reception. Why is he treating you like this?”

"You could say this family is a memento of my grandfather. I did not acquire this myself. Do you not-…"

Sayama was going to say "have anything like that", but he swallowed the words.

Shinjou sighed, thought for a moment, and then spoke.

"Don't worry. I do have…a younger brother. My twin brother. But…" She gave a bitter smile and lowered her head slightly when she saw Tamiya looking at her. "Your environment… Whether you can call it a family or not, it's quite amazing."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod. He then amended it to, "I suppose so."

At that point, he realized he had a bit of leeway within him now. He knew she was not completely alone.

He concluded that the male language mixed into her speech[2] was due to that environment of hers. He then nodded slightly in her direction.

"Now then. Thank you for seeing me off. …Will I see you tomorrow?"

Shinjou nodded and gave only a slight smile. That was the sign of their parting.

A girl stood on the rooftop of Takaakita Academy's second year general school building.

She stood on the western edge overlooking the nightscape of Akigawa City.

It was Brunhild wearing her uniform and with her gray hair blowing in the wind.

As the moon shone down on the rooftop, she placed her hands on the railing and opened her mouth.

She cast her eyes down while otherwise expressionless . Her opened lips did not produce simple words. She sang.

It was the hymn Silent Night.

"Stille Nacht Heil'ge Nacht

Alles schlaft einsam wacht

Nur das traute hoch heilige Paar

Holder Knab'im lockigten Haar

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh

Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh."

She slowly raised her head.

Once she finished singing, she opened her eyes to find the round moon in the heavens. While watching that light, her expression changed.

"I hate this sky… It has that light that our sky did not. It is not the light of the underworld…"

Brunhild sighed as the moonlight reflected in her eyes.

And then her expression changed once more as if it was jumping up. Her eyebrows leveled out, her eyes sharpened, and the expression from before vanished.

"Here he comes," she muttered as she reached her right hand into her pocket.

She pulled out a small blue stone and held it tightly in her right hand. She then slowly raised that right hand.

A wind then descended from the night sky. It was a black wind. Like a string or small stream, the black wind whirled around and wrapped about Brunhild's right hand. It solidified into a single object.

That black wind took the form of a black cat.

This glossy black cat stood atop her right arm.

Brunhild stretched her arm out horizontally as easily as if the cat was weightless. The cat climbed across her arm and onto her right shoulder. Brunhild lowered her arm and the cat climbed down it to the floor.

Immediately afterwards, Brunhild wrote something in the air using her right hand and snapped her fingers.

As soon as that clear sound rang out, the cat looked up . And…

"Ahh, I'm exhausted. It can be hard to tell which is the real me."

A young male voice came from the cat. Nevertheless, Brunhild remained expressionless.

"We have to keep up appearances so as to avoid suspicion. More importantly, how did it go?"

"As expected, the Royal Palace faction is hopeless. They don't have the strength of an organization like we do."

"I did not ask for your impressions. I want a report on the facts."

Brunhild folded her arms and began tapping her right toes on the floor.

Seeing that, the cat said, "I think you are absorbing some bad habits from Low-Gear. You have such bad manners."

"Shut it. If you say anything more, I'll throw you into the room of a classmate who is yearning for a pet."

"No, I don't want that… It's only any fun at first." The cat hung its head, sighed, and then straightened up once more. "The peaceful faction that sympathizes with UCAT turned away a messenger from the Royal Palace faction. The messenger was a strong member of the Royal Palace faction, a werewolf named Gale-…Gale-something. But he was cornered by UCAT and killed himself."

"They did that to a werewolf? I know their species gets a lot stupider when their true nature kicks in, but that couldn't have been easy."

"Well, the pursuit unit was slaughtered, but the UCAT special division arrived afterwards and trapped him in a Concept Space. Werewolves are a poor match for precious metals when it comes to elemental concepts. Okay, now this."

The black cat rolled over and showed off its belly. He was asking Brunhild to rub it, so she crouched down and poked his belly with her index finger. The gentle jab caused the cat to arch its back.

"Ahhh! My hips! Not the hips! My guts! I feel some indescribable sensation in my guts!!"

"Stop speaking so oddly and get on with the report. What will we do regarding the peaceful faction and the Royal Palace faction?"

"W-we of the City faction will not contact either side. Fafner who has worked his way up lately made the announcement. …And according to Venerable Hagen, the Royal Palace faction will likely take action out of desperation."

"The Royal Palace faction will? A group that split from the peaceful faction based on nothing but ideals is planning to attack UCAT? They don't think they can manage by relying on nothing but youthful vigor like Fafner does, do they?"

"No, they don't."

The cat got up and began licking his belly.

While still crouched down, Brunhild said, "Stop acting so self-important and get on with it."

"C'mon, you don't have to act like that. We were both deployed here, so we are on equal footing, right? You have been getting a bit carried away lately, Brunhild."

"Have I?"

"Yes. Just the day before yesterday, I took a peek inside the sweets shop in front of the school and you suddenly had a kid in there strip naked and bow down before you."

"Do not misrepresent what happened. He flipped up my skirt first. For a woman of 1st-Gear, having anyone but her husband do that is a humiliation. I was crying in my heart as I made him bow down. And I also swore to never forgive that kid."

"Sorry. My heart must have been too clouded because I could not see any tears. …And is that really such a humiliation?"

Brunhild grabbed the black cat's back legs in her hands, spread them out in a T-shape, and lifted him up. She then shook him up and down.

"Ahhh! Such humiliation! Stop, stop! If you keep looking at me like this, a new side of me will awaken!"

"As long as you understand."

She put the cat back down. The cat dragged his limp waist along and forced a smile.

"E-every day with you is quite stimulating. Although becoming numb to stimulation is a sign your life is over."

"Just finish with the report before I decide to do something else."

"Hmm," thought the cat. "Do you remember the Leviathan Road? That thing Venerable Hagen mentioned ."

"Yes. That information he got from a strange information broker, right? …We had predicted it ourselves as well. On December 25 of this year, the activation of the negative concepts of this Gear will reach the critical point."

"Yes, and so we must take back the other half of 1st-Gear's Concept Core from UCAT and stop the activation of the negative concepts as part of 1st-Gear. … And UCAT is trying to do the same but with themselves in charge. Anyway…the Leviathan Road is an attempt by UCAT to obtain all of the Concept Cores. But…"

"?"

"It seems a unit put together just for that purpose has begun to move. It was apparently that unit that cornered the messenger of the Royal Palace faction. It is known as Team Leviathan and was created from the top elites of UCAT's special division."

"What is your point?'

"You can't tell? Some higher members of UCAT are involved with this unit. And so the Royal Palace faction will target Team Leviathan instead of UCAT as a whole. If they could capture Ooshiro Kazuo, the head of Japanese UCAT, they might gain a significant advantage in negotiations."

Brunhild stood up, folded her arms, and slowly moved her head down.

"Hmm," she murmured as the black cat looked up at her.

"But… Hey, Brunhild, were you singing before I arrived?"

"Eh?" Brunhild looked down at the cat and finally spoke without changing her expression. "I was not singing."

"Really? I seem to remember hearing it on the wind. You, Venerable Regin, and Lady Gutrune loved that Low-Gear man's-…"

"Do cats show sentimentality by speaking of things they know nothing about?"

"I am being serious here, Brunhild. In a way, you were the person in the closest position to the cause of 1st-Gear's destruction."

"…"

"It bothers me that, as our fight approaches its end, you are here," the cat slowly lay down, "observing the man who destroyed 1st-Gear. It seems to me that would be bad for your mental health."

Brunhild's eyebrows arched slightly, her lips formed a smile that was not quite bitter, and she crouched down to pet the cat's back.

"Am I really that on edge?"

"You were earlier. When Miss Feigned Ignorance stopped by, you were legitimately mad when you mentioned how much you love forests and she replied by mentioning celery."

Brunhild dug through her memories before replying.

With a serious expression, she said, "That is because I hate celery."

"…"

"I can't stand Chinese chives or mitsuba either. Whenever I order udon at the cafeteria, I ask for no mitsuba, but Old Tome always legitimately forgets and puts it in. …And that old woman is too cute to complain to."

"It doesn't really matter, but I think you are building up too much stress from little things."

"Oh? I am not building up stress at all."

"Really? Then how are you relieving-…no, ah!! Stop, stop! Not the ass! The ass is the last place I want-…!"

Once Brunhild rendered the cat unable to stand, she stood up.

She walked over to the north edge of the rooftop where she could see level scenery with the lights of houses and buildings in the distance.

Headlights could be seen running along the roads within the school grounds, but that was the only movement.

She looked straight down and spotted light falling on the grass behind the school building. The light came from the first floor hallway in front of the Kinugasa Library. She could see a single shadow moving through that horizontal line of lights.

"Siegfried…" she muttered. "What would he do if he knew a ghost from 60 years ago had returned?"

Chapter 7: A Peaceful Morning

Chapter 7

“A Peaceful Morning”

An unfamiliar memory becomes a linchpin
It holds one in place
And informs one of something

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It holds one in place

And informs one of something

Sayama was in a grassy plain.

He had no body. Only his vision floated there.

As he glanced around with that vision, he could see the plain was surrounded by cedar trees. The sky above his head seemed to stretch on forever and a mountain range could be seen beyond the forest. When Sayama saw the cirrus clouds crossing the sky, he finally began to think.

…Is this a dream?

It had to be. Only his thoughts existed in what seemed like another reality.

Was this scene drawn from his memory or created from a mixture of memories? Sayama could not tell.

However, Sayama decided this was not actually a dream. The wind, sky, and rustling forest were all too noisy. He could sense the movement and disorder that only real objects held.

The fact that he could feel the wind told him he had his senses.

…Then can I speak?

"_____"

He had no voice. But he could move. Instead of trying to walk, he had to create a feeling like he was tilting his body forward. His body still did not seem to exist, but his vision moved.

And then he heard a sound from the right.

…?

With that voiceless question, he turned toward the sound. He found a man leaving the forest in the distance. He appeared to be in the gap between middle-aged and elderly. He had graying hair, a slender face, and a lean

body. He wore a heavy brown coat meant for mountain climbing. The leather coat had fur added and Sayama guessed that it was quite expensive.

The man was running with the knapsack over his right shoulder shaking back and forth.

He was running toward Sayama's location and seemed to be chasing something.

He opened his mouth and white puffs of breath escaped.

Sayama heard him say, "It… It really was here!"

From the sound of his voice, his throat had to be very dry.

The man fell to his knees, got back up, and dropped the knapsack from his right shoulder countless times as he ran. As the white puffs of his breathing grew larger and he fell to his knees yet again, he tossed the knapsack aside.

He fell forward once and his right hand reached the ground.

He stood up. He began running once more. He ran and ran some more. He continued in a straight line toward Sayama.

He approached so close Sayama felt he could have reached out and touched the man. At that point, Sayama noticed two things.

The first was that the man's clothing was not modern.

The second was that the man was missing his left arm.

The design of his leather coat and his pants was very rough. None of the emblems one would expect on mountain climbing gear was in evidence. Sayama took a closer look at the mountain boots treading on the grass.

…Military boots?

They were antiques made of real leather. As the man ran in those boots and his body swayed, it was clear that his left sleeve had nothing in it. The large leather coat's sleeve held its form well, so Sayama had not noticed until now.

Sayama instinctually took a step back from the man running toward him.

Sayama did not know who the man was, but he had a feeling he had seen the man somewhere before.

…Who is he?

At some point, the man had started clutching a machine in his right hand. It looked like a black pocket watch and it had several long hands and short hands.

And then Sayama looked at the man's face. His thin face had the beginnings of a beard and he was breathing quickly and shallowly. However…

…He is smiling? No. That is not a smile. That is joy.

This was the expression of a man who had had some wish granted or who had achieved something.

…I cannot even guess what would give me a look like that.

Just as Sayama had that thought, the man cut by beside him.

While existing as nothing but his vision, Sayama sighed. He would no longer be able to see the man's expression. The man had passed by, so turning around would only show him the man's back.

However, Sayama still turned around. He wanted to see what it was the man sought.

…But there should only be a forest that way.

While taking a step back, Sayama turned around.

And he saw a giant shadow.

"!?"

It was a tower.

A giant tower filled almost his entire vision. It started on the grassy plain and continued all the way up into the heavens.

Beyond the bluish-black shadow, white clouds wrapped around the wind. He looked up, but could not see the top of the tower. Because it stretched up vertically , he could not see the very top from where he was. All he

could tell was that the tower seemed to be made out of a collection of rectangles.

What is this? muttered Sayama in his mind. *That wasn't there before.*

But as soon as he began to wonder why, the answer came to him. That invisible wall in that Okutama forest. A Concept Space. His vision may have moved through to the other side of one of those walls.

He lowered his vision and found the man standing quite nearby. The man's back was less than ten steps away. As he looked up at the tower, his warm breaths escaped as white puffs of wind.

Sayama heard the man speak.

"So it really was here…"

He breathed out, breathed in, and then dropped to his knees.

His butt then dropped to the ground, but he never stopped looking up.

"Babel… The relic that tells of the beginning of the Concept War!!" he spoke.

His words were like a punch to Sayama's consciousness.

Sayama jumped up.

"!"

He now saw a different scene from that dream: the top bunk of a bunk bed, a blanket, a small room, a close-by ceiling, a fluorescent light sticking down, and sunlight entering through the window behind him.

There was no wind. There was only the sweat sticking to his body.

"This is…"

He finally realized it was his own room.

"What a pathetic way to wake up," he sighed while lightly shaking his head. He realized that his body

existed once more. The sweat he had felt was definitely there.

And his left arm hurt. The pain seemed to throb in the core of his body.

He frowned slightly and realized once more that this was not a dream.

He hung his head down and something fell from his head.

"…?"

Something small was moving atop his blanket. It was brown and had its limbs sprawled out.

He picked it up in his right hand and held it up to his face. It was Baku. Baku remained obediently still as he held its back between his fingers. When he saw the white fur covering its belly swelling out, Sayama recalled the conversation from the night before.

"You can show people the past in the form of dreams."

In that case…

"Was that dream…something that actually happened?"

Baku only tilted its head. Realizing it may not have been able to make such distinctions, Sayama smiled bitterly at the fact that he was speaking to an animal. However…

…Does that tower have something to do with another Gear?

"He called it Babel."

He decided he would learn about all that this afternoon. Ooshiro had said he would be waiting for Sayama at the Imperial Palace. He did not know what would happen there, though. But for now…

"I have student council work with Izumo and Kazami before that," he muttered.

He then wondered if Izumo knew about UCAT.

Shinjou sat as the scenery rush by.

She was inside a train. She wore an orange shirt and white trousers while sitting on the end of the seats with a small bag on her lap. Ooshiro Kazuo sat next to her wearing a brown suit.

The two of them were riding a special express train from Oume to Tokyo. They were still only just out of Tachikawa to the west of Tokyo, but a great number of people had come onboard at Tachikawa. A wall of people had formed in front of Shinjou.

She spoke while embracing the bag on her lap.

"Wow. Ooshiro-san, there are so many people… Why are there so many people here?"

"That is a question of eros. Ha ha ha. …It is because the Japanese are a very diligent people."

"…At what?"

As Shinjou frowned, Ooshiro smiled bitterly. His eyes bent like bows behind his glasses.

"By the way, why did you decide to go to the city for the first time? I thought the princess of UCAT was too sheltered to ask to go along for the preparations."

"Well…" Shinjou slightly held her own body as if to hide her chest. However, her eyebrows rose slightly. " Sayama-kun doesn't know that…so it's okay. And the others will be coming later, right? I can't be the only one not to go."

"Does he weigh on your mind that much?"

Shinjou froze in place when asked that.

The train shook. Shinjou shook with it, but Ooshiro did not.

They were arriving at Kokubunji Station. Shinjou ended up leaning against Ooshiro until the train came to a stop. As the doors opened, Shinjou lowered her head slightly toward Ooshiro and fixed her position. She saw even more people board the train.

As the wall of people before her grew even denser, Shinjou let out a cry of wonder. She took a breath and looked over to find Ooshiro staring intently at her.

He was waiting for an answer. Once she realized that, Shinjou lowered her shoulders and shrunk down at the edge of the seat.

"Yes…He does," she quietly admitted. Once she did that, she had to give a reason. "After all, I realized I never thanked him yesterday. …And I only learned after he left that his clothes, his watch, and his pens were all left for him by his grandfather."

"He thinks of his relatives as strangers. …So does it really matter?"

Shinjou turned toward Ooshiro with a look of shock.

That was something Sayama had said when speaking with her the night before.

"I-I never told anyone about that. You don't mean…"

Shinjou brushed her hand along her back and hair.

However, she found nothing.

Ooshiro said, "Do you want me to tell you how I knew that?"

"Y-yes."

"I see. How honest of you. …But I will never tell y-… Wait, hey. Let go of that."

"Shut up. No matter how high a position you have, this is an invasion of privacy."

After tightening Ooshiro's tie as much as she could, Shinjou let go.

"Last night has influenced me a lot," she said.

"Like when you weighed Mikoto-kun's life with the enemy's life and you could not choose between them?"

"Yes. Saying it was my first time on the front lines is just an excuse. If that sniper shot had not come, who knows what would have happened."

"You are thinking of this wrong. It is because that sniper shot was there that we do not know what would have happened."

Shinjou looked up quickly and then hung her head down once more.

"You're right," she muttered as Ooshiro looked away from her.

"What a pain," he said as he looked forward. "Your comrade said they fired because they had deemed the situation dangerous. Are you unable to trust your comrades?"

"I trust them. But…I could see the look of fear in our enemy's eyes when he saw me. And I could see the injury on Sayama-kun's left arm."

"So even though you and your comrade were looking at the same thing, you saw something different. …When did you start talking about what sounds like a concept?" commented Ooshiro. He placed a hand on Shinjou's head and stroked it. "Then how about you do whatever little you can do? Give flowers to the dead and alms to the living, and you can make up for your sins…or so they say."

"Tes. But I do plan to give flowers after the autopsy. Same with the advance unit."

"I see. That leaves alms for the living. You do understand that you are not the type that will be satisfied after simply thanking Mikoto-kun, don't you?"

"Yes. …What am I supposed to do? Sayama-kun can't use his left arm very much thanks to the injury."

"Then you can act as a replacement for his left arm."

"Eh?" Shinjou turned toward Ooshiro and frantically began waving her hands. "I-I can't do that. That would require being with him at all times."

"I know a good way you can do that. It may be a bit troublesome, but you, Shinjou Sadame-kun, do not have to go."

A look of realization appeared on Shinjou's face when she realized what he meant.

Ooshiro gave a deep nod of understand and raised his right thumb.

"Well, a lot of people will be coming today: your comrades, him, and a connection to the past. …You can make up your mind there."

As he spoke, an announcement sounded within the train. They were approaching Mitaka Station.

On that special express train, their stop at Tokyo Station was only seven stops away. The sound of the brakes reverberated through the floor and the train shook.

However, Shinjou no longer shook with it.

Sayama ate an early meal in the cafeteria building and headed for the Kinugasa Library. He walked along the walkway, cut across in front of the third year general school building, and made his way to the back of the second year general school building.

He wore his school uniform, but the left sleeve of the shirt was unbuttoned.

His left arm was still wrapped in bandages. He had removed them when bathing that morning, but he had held a large white bandage-like paper against the wound . It had hurt, but no blood had seeped into the paper. He assumed that meant a powerful hemostatic agent had been applied.

As he walked behind the second year general school building, he suddenly recalled having passed by this way

the day before. He looked up at the distant emergency staircase on which he had spoken with Ooki.

…A lot of strange things have happened in just one day.

It had been past 11:00 PM by the time he had returned to school the night before.

He recalled the conversation with Tamiya Kouji when the young man had dropped him off in front of the main entrance.

Tamiya had bowed and said, "If possible, come visit us sometime soon. My father, mother, and sister would be delighted."

"I thought I made too much noise night after night with the after-test parties."

"My father says you can have parties every night if you wish. Also, you may have been staying away, but you and Yume-sama still have rooms in the Tamiya household."

"Don't say that," warned Sayama.

The Tamiya family controlled the entire underside of Akigawa city, but they always protected the Sayama family because they were greatly indebted to Sayama's grandfather. He did not know what his grandfather had done, but they had protected his grandfather, his father, and himself. He had stayed with them up until middle school.

The relationship was less like that of a family and more like that of superior and subordinate.

Every member of the Tamiya family trusted Sayama as much as his grandfather.

This was not a nuisance. However…

"Will I ever be able to repay them in some way?" muttered Sayama as he walked on.

He checked the watch on his left arm.

The hands of the black watch he had received at UCAT pointed toward 8:32 AM. The arranged time had been nine sharp, but he guessed Izumo and Kazami would already be there. Those two were always together.

"They even go to the absurd extent of living in the same dorm room."

He smiled bitterly. He did not know the details, but he knew there had been a large dispute over that. It was only natural that the actions of the heir to IAI would be talked about.

"Izumo is actually 20 since he used to live overseas and Kazami's parents agreed to it. They just barely managed to get by thanks to that."

He had gotten to know the two of them during the student council election, but he had heard rumors of the two even before then.

You never know what will happen with relationships, thought Sayama as his bitter smile deepened.

He heard a bird chirping from the line of trees behind the school building. It was the voice of a baby bird asking for food. Sayama entered the school building's back entrance as he listened to the bird.

He continued toward the Kinugasa Library on the western end of the first floor. As he passed through the dim central lobby, he noticed two figures approaching from the front entrance.

One was a girl and one was a cat.

The girl wore a blazer, had gray hair, and had purple eyes. The cat at her feet was black.

Sayama had seen her once before.

…In March, we had a meeting between the new student council and the upcoming leaders of the different clubs. She was from the art club.

Her name was Brunhild Schild.

Her clothes, hairstyle, and lack of expression were all identical to when he had seen her at that meeting.

Only her eyes moved on that expressionless face.

Sayama realized she was looking at his left arm.

They passed by. As she moved away silently, Sayama gave her one parting glance.

…It looked like she was measuring the extent of my wound.

Despite seeing his bandages and sling, she had not shown any curiosity, surprise, or fear. She had had the look of someone viewing something they had seen countless times before. While storing that look of hers in his memory, Sayama walked to the entrance of the library.

Brunhild entered the art room and locked the door from the inside.

Once all outside noise was gone, she took a breath. She glanced over at the window to ensure the curtain was closed as well.

Her gaze met with that of the black cat at her feet and she snapped her fingers with a blue stone gripped in her right hand.

With that clear noise, Brunhild asked the cat a question .

"Why did you disappear in your cat form last night?"

"I went to a small meeting. Even those from the peaceful faction of 1st-Gear have a lot of animals like me. I exchanged some information with them."

"Did you learn anything?"

The cat nodded.

"Ooshiro Kazuo of Japanese UCAT plans to visit the Imperial Palace today. And the peaceful faction will be holding preliminary negotiations for the Leviathan Road tomorrow. It seems they were not given much notice about this."

"…Is this Ooshiro stupid? If they rush things this much, the Royal Palace faction will panic and take action. They have been rejected by the peaceful faction too much already."

"Yes. They all said the Royal Palace faction was at their wits' end. …I hear they are poorly united on the

inside. It seems the hawks plan to target Ooshiro Kazuo, but if that fails, the doves intend to surrender."

"They…do not have a Concept Core. However, our leader, Venerable Hagen, does."

"It will be difficult for them. When 1st-Gear was destroyed, a gate was opened in the royal palace and in the city. The royal palace one came out near UCAT and the nobles who possessed Concept Space technology escaped through it and became the Royal Palace faction. But they did not have the Concept Core. 1st-Gear's Concept Core was split into two, but they had neither half."

"Yes. The king split it into two for safety. The half containing the writing concept was used in the weapon concept reactor of Venerable Hagen's mechanical dragon, Fafnir Custom." Brunhild lowered her gaze. "The other half containing the world construction concept was stolen from the concept facility below the royal palace. Stolen by that Low-Gear man who took the holy sword Gram created by Doctor Regin. …It seems Doctor Regin joined with Fafnir to protect the Concept Core. He absorbed the Concept Core into the reactor."

"I heard about that," said the black cat. "The battle occurred in that facility below the royal palace you mentioned, right? The king, the princess, Fafnir, and that single Low-Gear man were there. By the time the rest of those in the castle arrived, it was all over and the world was beginning to collapse. When they saw Fafnir and the king dead, and the princess badly wounded, they decided the Low-Gear man had escaped after transferring the Concept Core from Fafnir's reactor into the holy sword Gram."

"Yes. According to Fasolt and the others who are now in the peaceful faction, even as she continued to bleed, Lady Gutrune told them the world would soon be destroyed. And Lady Gutrune even managed to call out to the city from the Royal Palace. She told them we had lost and that they needed to hurry to Low-Gear through the two gates."

Brunhild sighed and scratched at her hair.

She walked over to the easel in the center of the art room.

The canvas with a forest painted on top sat on it. Brunhild stared at the blank space in the center where a cabin and some people still needed to be painted.

"This forest and everything else disappeared. All thanks to that man who came from Low-Gear and the holy sword Gram he stole. It seems he used the world construction concept inside Gram to destroy 1st-Gear."

"How?"

"1st-Gear was a flat world. It was a closed world where the universe was shaped like a dome and had a clear end. …According to our estimations, the world construction concept was sent out of control and 1st-Gear continually degenerated inwards until it formed a single point and disappeared."

Brunhild formed an expression. Her eyes opened lightly and her lips formed a shallow smile.

"We lost many lives and our home. And I lost everything important to me. All we gained in return was defeat and the path to dependency. …And now Gram is sealed below IAI headquarters, so we cannot reach it. Fortunately, the Leviathan Road is beginning. We can

negotiate to have Gram unsealed." She looked down at the cat and spoke slowly. "Sixty years is a long time, isn't it?"

Kinugasa Library was as long as four classrooms.

It was also as wide as two classrooms. It contained so much space it had to stick out from the school building.

Its structure was similar to the inner shell of a ship. The central portion was lowered down in steps and each level contained a space for tall bookshelves and a table for four. The bottommost level had a long wide space with not only a table and chairs but also decorative plants.

The table at the bottom of the library currently had four people using it.

One was Sayama with his uniform's coat draped over his shoulders.

Across from him was Kazami wearing casual clothes and to the left of her was Izumo wearing a black track suit.

Across from Izumo and to Sayama's left was Ooki wearing pajamas.

Sayama gathered documents on the table in one hand.

"That settles most of it. From what happened at last year's invitation for new students, it might be safest to allow activities in the dorm hallways."

"We need to make it very clear that the doors to the dorm rooms do not fall under the category of the hallways, though. The student council last year did not declare that, so the civil engineering club smashed holes in the dorm room doors when calling for new members."

"They passionately said they would throw dynamite in if you did not join, right? What happened to the people who joined back then?"

"Starting the next day, they spent a month constructing a dam in Gunma for the new member training camp."

"And so they had an excellent civil engineering club by the time they came back, hm? Brainwashing is a frightening thing. We need to nip that in the bud this year."

"Yes," said Kazami with a nod before turning toward Izumo. Sayama also turned to look at Ooki.

Ooki had her eyes cast down and her hands lightly clasped atop her lap. Her body was lightly rocking forward and backward as she dozed off.

Meanwhile, Izumo's back was straight, his arms were firmly crossed, and he looked straight forward…all while fast asleep.

"Izumo's eccentricities give him some convenient abilities. That must come in handy during long meetings."

"Well, most of the time you and I can answer any questions as the vice president and treasurer. It makes me wonder why we even have a president… But to change the subject, what is that on your shoulder, Sayama?"

When Kazami looked over, Baku raised his head from where he had been sleeping on Sayama's left shoulder.

"Is it an animal?' she asked and stretched out her hand .

Baku stared at her before…

"Ah, it looked away," she said in disappointment.

After seeing Baku lower his head once more, Sayama turned toward Kazami.

She sank down a bit into her chair and folded her arms behind her head.

"Do not worry about it, Kazami. He likely has yet to grow accustomed to his surroundings."

"I want to touch him. My parents had a bird, so I could never have a cat or dog. …Ah."

Kazami's mouth hung open as she looked to Ooki next to Sayama.

To Sayama's left, Ooki swayed. Before anyone could stop her, her forehead slammed into the table.

Ooki's forehead reached the table with a thud and her voice leaked out.

"Ee…"

"Oh, Sayama. Looks like she's gonna cry, so do something about it."

"Such as?"

"Call out to her in a kind voice to calm her down or hit her even harder to knock her unconscious."

"It would probably be even more amazing if I could do both at the same time."

"Hwaaaahhh!"

"Wow, she's really crying."

Sayama decided to try to wake her up, but he realized he could not use his left arm.

He had no choice but to turn toward her and pat her on the back with his right hand.

"What is it, Ooki-sensei?"

While still lying face down on the table, Ooki coughed once and said, "A-all of a sudden… All of a sudden there was a thunk. I-it scared the crap out of me."

"That last part was unnecessary. In fact, where did you learn that phrase? Well, anyway. Let me see your face."

"Wh-why? Do you want to see me crying that badly?"

"No, the shock of the impact might have knocked a front tooth out of place or smashed the cartilage of your nose. If so, you need to hurry to an excellent cosmetic surgeon. …But do not worry. A yakuza family I know has an excellent one. Even if your pinky is-…gwoh."

Kazami slapped Sayama after having circled around next to him at some point.

He fell from his chair and asked, "What are you doing to an injured person? We certainly have a cruel student council treasurer."

"Shut up. C'mon, sensei. Your face is probably fine, so please look up."

Sayama sighed and moved away from that scene of soothing. He gave Kazami a glance telling her to use his

chair and then stared straight ahead. However, Izumo was still boldly remaining fast asleep, so there was no one to talk to.

A glance at his watch told him the time was 10:30 AM. The arranged time to meet in the city was one, so it was still too soon to head out if he was taking the train.

With nothing else to do, Sayama walked over to the stepped floor next to the table. He stood before a random bookshelf.

It was lined with hard cover books as thick as dictionaries. A placard at the top of the bookshelf said " mythology". A series of 11 black-spined books had the author's name written in gold thread. The name was Kinugasa Tenkyou. The publisher was Izumo Writings Department.

As Sayama read those two names, he called out, " Kazami."

"What? I was just getting to the good part, so keep it short."

"It is about the family of that man sleeping there with his eyes open. Have you heard anything about IAI from him?"

"About IAI? No. He says he plans to actually start studying when he gets to college, though."

"I see," was all Sayama said in reply.

However, he felt there was some sort of sign here.

The night before, he had visited of an organization within IAI called UCAT. There, he had learned of ten alternate worlds. There had been a war known as the Concept War during World War 2 and all of those alternate worlds had been destroyed.

That morning, he had been given a strange dream involving a giant tower named Babel.

And now he found these books on mythology in a school strongly backed by IAI.

"Eleven volumes…"

The ten alternate worlds plus this world made eleven.

…Am I the one jumping to conclusions now?

Just as he began quietly laughing at his own thoughts, he heard Ooki's voice.

"Are you interested in those books?"

He turned around to find Ooki sitting up with a red forehead. Kazami gave the OK sign behind her and nodded, so Sayama met Ooki's gaze.

"Is there something special about them?"

"Yes, those books were written by the school's founder ."

That much was obvious just from looking at the books, but Sayama let Ooki continue.

She wiped tears from her eyes and wiped her pajama sleeve on the table. She then let out a short groan.

"I heard everything about Kinugasa Tenkyou from the headmaster when I arrived here," she said. "Despite being the founder, he never actually worked at the school . He worked with the Izumo company even before the war and was really well known in the fields of military

and mythology. Are you familiar with the First Higher School?"

Kazami shook her head, but Sayama answered.

"It became the University of Tokyo."

"It seems he worked as a professor there. In his research of Japanese mythology, he crossed the Izumo Province. That is how he gained his connections with the Izumo company."

"Wow, you know a lot about this. This is the first time you've ever seemed like an actual teacher."

"I would expect something like that from that wicked student over there, but you too, Kazami!?"

Sayama ignored Ooki and pulled out one of Kinugasa's books. He took the first volume.

The book's text was written horizontally. As he tried to get used to holding the book in his right hand, he noticed the cover was very worn out. He awkwardly opened it with just the one hand. It began with a world map and it wrote in detail about Norse legends while including black-and-white photographs and illustrations. The

publication information said this was the first edition printed in 1934.

…*This must be valuable.*

As he flipped through it, he found abundant illustrations and photographs, but…

"There is no photograph of Kinugasa himself."

"According to Siegfried-san, he was injured during the Russo-Japanese War. Apparently, he disliked having his picture taken after that."

"Does that old man know about all this? He is not here today, though."

"Old man Siegfried has been feeding the chickens behind the dorms and the other birds in the area every morning. He opened up for us before heading out today. If there is something you want to know, why don't you ask him?" suggested Kazami.

After a yawn, Izumo spoke up, "He was sent here from IAI, so he probably knows a lot. The person in charge here died about ten years ago, so he agreed to manage the place and search for any data the company

needs." Izumo stretched his arms up. "Now, what were we talking about, Chisato? Was it about the archery club wanting to have human target practice to invite new members in?"

"That was seven topics ago. We were discussing how to handle sleeping idiots."

As Kazami grinned and held up her fists, Ooki moved away from her.

Ooki walked over to Sayama, her slippered feet creating muffled footsteps.

She stood beside him in her pajamas.

She ignored the repeated sounds of flesh being struck behind her and looked at the book in Sayama's hand.

"It isn't often you show interest in something, Sayama-kun. I think this is a good thing." She yawned once and held a hand over her mouth. "Did you find an answer to that question from yesterday?"

"What was that?"

"What it is that you could get serious about…yawn."

"Is that something to ask while yawning?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry. But when it comes down to it, I can be harsh. My motto is to be serious yet carefree so you don't completely boil away. But can you remember one thing?"

"?"

Ooki used her finger to count the books Sayama had been looking at. She passed by in front of Sayama and her finger topped at the tenth volume.

"If you find something or someone you can get serious about, make sure not to destroy or fear either one. And…" She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "When those who rarely get serious finally do get serious, they can draw out a lot of power. Thinking that you cannot get serious means you are constantly thinking about getting serious." She took a breath. "So you can do it. I guarantee it."

"Ooki-sensei, I understand. …But that last comment was unnecessary."

"Uuh," groaned Ooki as Sayama glanced at his watch. It was almost eleven.

…If I take a train that stops at every station and grab some lunch in the city, I can kill enough time.

Sayama nodded and decided to leave.

If he made his way to the Imperial Palace, he would find Ooshiro and maybe even Shinjou.

As he thought about UCAT and her, he suddenly recalled what Ooki had just said.

…Becoming serious, hm?

He decided it was time to go.

Ooki was looking up at him with a puzzled look. Kazami was punching Izumo.

Sayama spoke to the girl.

"Kazami, I will be leaving now. Is that okay?"

"Die, die, die! …Sure, you can leave. …No, not you!"

"Which one of those was meant for me…?"

With a bitter smile, Sayama noticed it was sunny through the window between the bookshelves.

He could hear violent blows and could see a slightly stiff look on Ooki's face, but it was a wonderful spring day outside.

Chapter 8: Chasing the Past

Chapter 8

“Chasing the Past”

If the past lies before your eyes
What are you as you view it?
Surely, you would not even be yourself

If the past lies before your eyes

What are you as you view it?

Surely, you would not even be yourself

After a bit over an hour of being shaken on the train from Akigawa, Sayama arrived at Tokyo Station.

After leaving the station building, it was only a straight path to the Imperial Palace.

"I was called to…the remains of Honmaru in the East Garden."

Wearing a gray suit, Sayama entered through the front gate, passed through a gap in a stone wall almost 10 meters tall, and made his way to the top of a hill.

The area inside was large. The air felt cold in the shadow below the stone wall and he walked on and on up a slope.

After making it to the top of the asphalt slope, he found an open area covered in grass.

To the north of the open area was the giant raised foundation for the main tower of a Japanese castle. The open area itself was two hundred meters square and surrounded by pine trees and thickets. The lawn was divided in two by the asphalt path cutting down the middle, but it was not off limits.

The sounds of the city could be heard in the distance. Those sounds were so faint they felt like something from a dream. It was all coming from beyond the trees surrounding the area.

And when Sayama entered this area, he saw no other visitors.

He stopped his hurrying feet and took a breath.

As usual, Baku was sleeping in his left breast pocket. The watch on his left wrist told him it was 1:10 PM. He had made it in time. Now he only needed to find them.

…Where is Shinjou-kun?

As Sayama looked around the deserted area, he realized something.

He was supposed to be looking for Ooshiro, not Shinjou.

He gave a bitter laugh. It shook his lungs slightly and he could feel it reverberating in his left arm.

Suddenly, he heard the grass rustling.

It was the wind.

The wind was blowing in from the east. He turned toward the rest area in that direction and the wind blowing up from the bottom of the hill shook the leaves of the trees and thickets on the slope that contained a viewing platform.

The wind moved the trees and the atmosphere moved.

Someone walking in front of the bench installed on the western wall of the concrete rest area displayed the movements of the wind.

It was as if she was playing with the strong wind.

She had long black hair. Slender, glossy bunches of her hair were dancing and undulating in the blowing wind.

The orange shirt below the hair and the white trousers supporting her slender figure were also blown around a bit as the wind picked up strength. He saw her shoulder, her back, and her other shoulder. She slowly lifted her head as her hair whipped around.

He saw her narrow black eyes and her lips with a hint of teeth between them.

Sayama's gaze met with those smiling eyes.

In that moment, she stopped walking. Still smiling, her mouth opened.

"Sayama-kun."

Sayama opened his mouth as well.

"Shinjou-kun."

The wind gave one last gust. Her hair swayed. Sayama watched that black glossy movement.

"…"

It danced up and fell back down.

In the next moment, Shinjou brushed the hair on her shoulder back. Her black hair spilled from her shoulder and down her back.

When Shinjou looked back at him, her head was tilted a bit in puzzlement as she smiled.

“Good day, I suppose. What am I supposed to say at times like this?”

Sayama nodded in response. He looked behind Shinjou and spotted Ooshiro raising his right thumb from where he sat on the bench. Sayama ignored him and spoke to Shinjou.

“It is good to see you again, Shinjou-kun.”

They began their talk at the bench Ooshiro had been sitting on.

Sayama sat in the afternoon sun with Shinjou on his right and Ooshiro on his left.

Shinjou sat with her legs held together and Sayama sat deeply on the bench with his elbows resting on his lap. On the other hand, Ooshiro sat with one leg up on the bench as if sitting partially cross-legged.

Sayama spoke first and it was in the form of a question .

“You said you would explain the details of the Concept War and the Leviathan Road, but why did you call me here?”

“Is it enough of an explanation to say it was to help persuade you? I actually have a fair bit of influence, so I reserved the place for us.”

“UCAT can do that?”

“We’re doing it right now. Speaking inside the Imperial Palace itself would have been best, but I’m not allowed inside after the fireworks incident…”

Sayama ignored that comment and looked around the area. It was true that there were no other visitors.

However, there was a single open-air café on the north end of the deserted area. A white mobile kitchen set was

surrounded by three tables with white parasols containing the UCAT logo.

No one was working at the café, but two customers sat below one of the parasols.

"I had the guards leave as well. This is important, after all."

As he spoke, Ooshiro pulled a black change purse from his pocket. He tossed it into Shinjou's hands. She looked confused as she caught it.

"Umm…What is this?"

Sayama nodded and answered, "Most people refer to it as an allowance."

"Wow. I've never gotten one before."

"I see. You must be happy. But be careful. Lonely old men like him think they can buy relationships with money."

"…I think that's different from the kind of allowance I've heard about."

"Just go buy some drinks," cut in Ooshiro. "You can spend 300 yen."

"In that case, get me an iced tea, Shinjou-kun. You can order whatever you want."

"Um, Mikoto-kun. Why did you say nothing about my drink?"

"That café's sign says drinks cost 150 yen."

"What? When did Japan's prices get so high! I'm shocked!"

"Old man, you should return to the mountains of Okutama. Tokyo is a dangerous place."

"You two sure get along well…" said Shinjou with a bitter smile.

She stood the coin purse up in her hand, took out exactly 450 yen in change, and handed the coin purse to Ooshiro. He took it and spoke in a completely serious tone of voice.

"I would like a hot red bean soup."

"I doubt they have it, but I'll do my best…"

As he listened to her footsteps across the gravel growing more distant, Sayama sighed.

"Once our drinks arrive, can we finally discuss the Concept War?"

Brunhild drew a brush across the large canvas.

After refining the shade of green on the palette, she added leaves to the forest that had already been painted over countless times. The black cat was curled up at her feet.

"You sure are taking your time with this. And to think you don't spend any time at all on your makeup."

"Do you want your prided black fur to be green?" she asked with a slight smile on her lips.

The cat looked up to find Brunhild's eyebrows as well as the corner of her mouth raised a bit.

A quiet song could be heard on her breaths. The rhythm Brunhild was subconsciously singing was the hymn Silent Night. The cat moved its ears to listen to the song.

"Is painting that much fun?" it asked.

The song stopped, but the brush did not.

"Yes. It is the one thing Lady Gutrune taught me that I can continue doing. How could I not enjoy that?"

"But you always paint scenery I have never seen."

The cat hung its head down and Brunhild's hand finally stopped. She looked down at the cat. However, the cat only yawned once with its head still hanging down.

Brunhild's shoulders drooped as she smiled bitterly. She placed the palette and brush on a table to the side.

"Do you know what the 1st-Gear world was like?"

After thinking for a bit, the black cat raised its head and shook its head.

Brunhild nodded and picked the cat up. She held it to her chest and stood back up.

The cat panicked and asked, “Shouldn’t you be painting?”

“Shouldn’t you be heading out to do your job soon? Earlier, I saw your observation target leaving down below.”

“You’re the one charged with observing him, so why am I always the one going after him? I was born here. I’m not a 1st-Gear creature.”

“Don’t be like that. But if that is how you are thinking, maybe I should teach you something about 1st-Gear before you leave.”

“Hmm,” thought the cat before finally nodding.

Brunhild smiled slightly and said, “Good, good. Come to think of it, you haven’t been told anything since the ceremony. You might have picked a bit up from what Venerable Hagen has told you, though.”

"Most of that is just fragments of information. People who know the whole story tend to omit aspects they assume everyone knows."

"True. Sorry."

She approached the blackboard at the back of the classroom.

The blackboard was stained with a pale whiteness. Brunhild placed one of her right fingers on it and slowly drew an oblong ellipse. She covered the top of the ellipse with a semicircle.

"This is 1st-Gear. This at the bottom is the ground and this at the top is space."

"Wow, that's lazy…Ow ow ow ow! Ahh! M-mommyyy!!"

"You were originally an abandoned cat, so you don't remember your mother."

"D-don't be so rude. Of course I remember her."

"Then tell me about her. If your information is accurate, I can find her for you."

"Well, let's see… I think she was a female that was older than me…ow ow ow! I give, I give!"

Brunhild sighed and flicked the ellipse on the blackboard with her finger.

"Listen. This is 1st-Gear."

Before the black cat could say anything, she scratched the blackboard with her nails. The cat cowered down and trembled at the high-pitched noise, so she continued her explanation.

"Essentially, it is a table of land floating in nothingness . The sun circles through the sky during the day, sleeps and becomes dark at night, and then returns to its original position. …We do not have what Low-Gear refers to as a moon."

"That sounds like ordering a plain pizza. Isn't it boring without any toppings like the moon?"

"Think of it as having the beauty of simplicity. You do not worry about something that was never there in the first place. …Although it is true the land is limited. Even so, the people and animals managed to live on as they adjusted to each other."

"Was it peaceful?"

"Yes. The Concept War may have continued for a long time, but the king only prepared two gates that an enemy could easily enter through. …The knights and mechanical dragons fought in the war, but we rarely invaded anyone. We had pride. We would survive until the time of destruction and then the world would judge us."

"The time of destruction, hm? …That was what this world calls 1999, when every single Gear would collide. Only the Gear with the most positive concepts would survive. Personally, I don't see how 1st-Gear's method of remaining on the defensive could let you survive."

"It was a matter of pride. We were fighting to protect ourselves, so we could be proud of what we were

fighting for. …The king disliked the idea of fighting to destroy our opponent. Especially after the queen died in the Concept War."

"So did the king leave the princess with Venerable Regin because she reminded him of the queen?"

"Yes. It was after that when Lady Gutrune took me in within the forest. …And a while after that, the Low-Gear man made his way in through a temporary gate."

Brunhild looked behind her. On the large canvas there, a single area was not painted.

"…"

Brunhild silently walked over to the back of the art room. A locker was located there.

The label on the locker said it was for the club head. She placed a hand on its door and spoke.

"Seeing the world close in and be destroyed was a dreadful sight. We watched it to the end by the gate, knowing that the world had gone too far in the negative direction to be fixed even if we retrieved the holy sword Gram. We saw it all disappear into nothingness."

"…"

"Do you know why the king prepared only two of the gates needed to attack other Gears and created mechanical dragons based on 5th-Gear technology despite the risks? After losing the queen in the Concept War, he did everything he could to protect 1st-Gear. It was all for the bare minimum of offense and defense needed. That was the pride of 1st-Gear. We would do whatever it took to survive until the time of destruction."

"What were you going to do then?"

"If 1st-Gear was to disappear, we would proudly surrender to the victorious Gear. …Even if we were surrendering, it was assumed that Gear would approve of our method of fighting."

She smiled bitterly. And the bitter smile continued on to form a full smile.

"1st-Gear knew it was a weak Gear. …And that was taken advantage of. Once we were destroyed, it was obvious we had done nothing but run from the fight. There is no pride in that."

As Brunhild spoke, she knocked on the locker door.

With the sound of a hinge, the door opened on its own. And inside the tall, narrow locker was…

"The 1st-Gear concept weapon, Requiem Sense[3]."

It was a giant scythe with the blade folded up. A supporting grip stuck perpendicularly from the long handle so that it could be used in fields. The blade that was the true essence of a scythe was folded down in both directions from the decorative attachment at the top, but just the frontmost portion of the blade was over a meter long.

And this scythe's ability went beyond its form.

Small lights began to gather around the opened locker. They were bluish-white lights that resembled fireflies. Those lights trailed light behind themselves as they gathered around the locker and gradually grew larger.

Brunhild stared at the blade which had some kind of writing engraved on it.

"This scythe stores the souls it hears. It is the underworld itself. Venerable Hagen possessed it as the chief administrator of the underworld, but…"

The black cat reached a paw out towards the lights. It tried to touch one, but its paw passed right through it. Brunhild gave a small laugh.

"It's no use. But it was about 10 years ago that this much light became visible here in Low-Gear. Before that, nothing was visible without preparing a Concept Space. …This Gear is slowly being damaged by the negative concepts and the Concept Cores of each Gear are reacting ."

"Are the souls of Lady Gutrune and the others inside that blade?"

"Most likely. But with so many souls inside, we would never see them clearly. Not unless something caused them to separate from all the others."

Brunhild snapped her right fingers.

The locker slowly closed and the surrounding light vanished.

Brunhild then lowered the black cat to the floor.

"Now, it is time for your job. …You know where your observation target was headed, right? Use the abilities given to you as a familiar to follow him into a Concept Space or wherever else he might go."

Shinjou soon returned with three cups in her hands.

She glanced back at the café behind her with a slightly surprised look.

"It really was a UCAT café. They all looked so bored."

"How about you say they were working hard to make it look more convincing?" said Ooshiro in resignation.

Next to him, Sayama took a cup with a straw in it. The aroma coming from it told him it was plain black tea. Shinjou seemed to have orange juice.

"Ooshiro-san, they did not have hot red bean soup…so I got you 100% juice instead."

"I see. That is a healthy choice. Thank you."

Ooshiro raised his right thumb and audibly drank through the straw.

Just as he did, Shinjou added, “It’s salted beef tongue juice.”

Ooshiro began choking magnificently, but Sayama ignored him and smiled at Shinjou.

“That is quite an exciting choice. And technically, it is not juice.”

“But this is a UCAT café. They said it has pieces of beef tongue in it to really bring out the flavor of the ingredients. Oh, and it was him over there that suggested it.”

Sayama looked over. Under a parasol sat two people who were difficult to tell apart in the shadow. One of them was raising a hand.

As Ooshiro kneeled on the ground in front of the bench, he commented, “So it was his doing.”

“Do you know him?”

"I'm sure you will be introduced to him later. More importantly, let us get to why I chose this place for today."

Ooshiro sat back on the bench and looked toward Sayama's chest. Baku poked his head out from his suit's breast pocket.

Ooshiro held his hand out and Baku silently let the man pet his head.

"Did he show you the past?"

"He showed me a strange dream."

"Eh? Of what?"

"Well," Sayama nodded. "A one-armed old man approached while out of breath in a grassy plain surrounded by a forest. When I turned around, I saw a giant tower."

"If we view that as a dream, the one-armed old man would represent your true character and the giant tower would represent the scope of your perversion. What do you think?"

"I am too perverted for even myself to see the top when I look up? …That is quite something."

"No, that is not what I meant… Your description of the dream lacked a lot of information, didn't it?"

"It did. Everything the man in the dream wore was old . I would guess it dates back to before the war. And the man referred to the tower as Babel. What was it?"

A smile appeared on Ooshiro's lips and he raised his right thumb.

"Excellent. It seems Baku has already approved of you. Baku will show his owner whatever truth they subconsciously wish to see. If you tell him your current intentions in words, he can show you the past of different Gears. However, you cannot see it if you do not wish to. Remember that." Ooshiro stood up and put his hands in his suit pockets. "It was all decided here before World War 2. At the beginning of the Showa era, a scholar noticed Babel and took action."

"…Who was he?"

"A man who worked as a professor at First Higher School – what is now known as Tokyo University – as a

technology adviser for Izumo Steel, the predecessor to IAI. He went on to found your school and made the original proposal for Izumo's National Defense Department. His name was Kinugasa Tenkyou," said Ooshiro. "He discovered some ruins on a trip through the Kinki region. That was Babel. After the events of the dream you saw, he entered Babel. He described Babel as being strange ruins. No one fully believed him. After all, he was the only one able to enter Babel."

"I find it hard to believe, but did those ruins have some sort of security mechanism?"

"Yes. For some reason only he, the initial discoverer, was able to pass through that mechanism. At the time, people accused him of rigging it so he could monopolize the knowledge inside. However, he asked for no compensation from Izumo and revealed everything he learned within, so those suspicions eventually disappeared. Izumo quickly entered the aviation and electronic industries, so it gained a position as a special research institute for the military. And eventually," he tapped at the asphalt with his toes, "a certain proposal was made right here. It was 1933. As Japan was

preparing its military, the most powerful person in the country was troubled by one thing: did this country truly approve of him?"

"…"

"And so this powerful person confided in a soldier who had worked as his chamberlain in the past. He wanted to do everything possible to protect the country from the rest of the world, so he wanted to know if the country could do anything from its position as the land of the gods."

Ooshiro lowered his gaze.

Sayama felt their gazes meet.

And then he felt a small movement in his left breast pocket.

It was Baku.

Baku stuck up out of the pocket.

And then Sayama saw the past.

Sayama existed as nothing but vision. He was in the same open space as before.

However, it looked different. The trees surrounding it were shorter and the path was made of dirt instead of asphalt.

The biggest difference was the absence of the distant noises of the city.

This is the past, realized Sayama.

A single table was set up where the café had been a moment before.

Two figures sat below the large white parasol.

Sayama moved toward them.

The first was a middle-aged gentleman wearing a white shirt and brown pants.

The second was an elderly soldier wearing a white military uniform.

The soldier had two maps spread out on the table.

They formed a world map centered on Japan.

The soldier opened his mouth to speak. Sayama heard two different voices. In addition to the actual words spoken in the past, he heard the meaning of those words in his own language.

"The Izumo Aviation Institute has an old professor named Professor Tenkyou. He developed this odd theory known as the Divine States-World Interaction Theory. According to this theory, the layout of ley lines gives Japan a layout identical to the entire world."

"Oh?" The middle-aged gentleman nodded and pushed his glasses up his nose. "What exactly does this man propose?"

"Japan's shape causes the Divine States to correspond to the continents of the world. All of those continents possess ley lines and all of those ley lines coincidentally pass through Japan. Or so his theory says." The elderly soldier pulled a fountain pen from his chest and held the map down with his hand. "I will now indicate where the ley lines connect."

The middle-aged gentleman nodded and the soldier brought the fountain pen to Japan.

He drew a ring of ink from Honshu's Tohoku region to Chubu region. He then drew a circle over East Asia. The top of the circle covered the Soviet Union and China and the bottom reached Burma. Lastly, he connected the two circles with a line.

"Tohoku to Chubu corresponds to East Asia. The coast starting at the northeast is the coast along the Soviet Union, Tokyo Bay is the Yellow Sea, the Izu Peninsula is Thailand, Shizuoka is India, Ise Bay is the Persian Gulf, and the Kii Peninsula is the Arabian Peninsula."

"What part of Japan corresponds to Japan as a part of the world?"

"Japan and the Philippines are the Izu Islands. When looking at this world map, Japan's prided Mt. Fuji fits perfectly with the location of Mt. Everest above India."

The soldier drew a circle around Honshu's Kinki region to its Chugoku region, drew a circle around Europe, and connected them with a line.

"Lake Biwa is the Caspian Sea and the nearly enclosed Osaka Bay is the Black Sea. The Kojima Peninsula is Greece and the area around Kure is the Italian Peninsula.

Tsushima is Great Britain, the Shimane Peninsula is Norway, and Sado is the Arctic islands."

The soldier paused for a moment.

However, the gentleman said nothing. He remained silent.

After a few seconds, the soldier's hand moved once more. He drew circles around Kyushu and Africa before connecting them with a line.

"Other than having Madagascar correspond to the area around Tanegashima, you can see the similarity in shape."

"Then does Shikoku correspond to Australia?"

"Exactly."

The soldier drew circles around Shikoku and Australia and connected them. He then drew circles around Hokkaido and the Americas and connected them.

"Hokkaido's Oshima Peninsula is Alaska. The central portion is North America. Nemuro and the four northern islands can be thought of as South America. Antarctica is

covered in ice and most of the land is below the ocean surface, so the portion of Japan's geography that protrudes onto the bottom of the ocean on the Pacific side corresponds to it."

"I see. And that is called the Divine States-World Interaction? What good is this absurd idea?"

"According to Professor Tenkyou, the whole influences the part and the part influences the whole. If Japan possesses the layout of the world due to the world's ley lines passing through, he suggests we could influence the world from here."

"How exactly?"

"All things are created from waves just as sound is and the ley lines of feng shui are vibrations – or waves – of the earth. In that case, if we can strengthen the amplitude of those vibrations, we can stimulate the earth's ley lines as they pass through Japan. That could allow Japan to take the earthly energy of those other parts of the world so as to protect the country."

Once the soldier made it that far, the middle-aged gentleman nodded as if urging him on.

The soldier bowed and said, “The Izumo Aviation Institute will create a National Defense Department and facilities for stimulating the ley lines located around Japan. The Izumo Aviation Institute has already appropriated funds for these facilities and can act at any time. They say they can grasp the flow of the ley lines around the world using the flow through the ley lines here and that they can increase Japan’s earthly energy.”

“So in other words, they can read ahead what will happen in the world while also strengthening Japan. Perhaps strengthen it to the point that it could be revived even if it was about to sink into the ocean.”

The soldier gasped at that last comment from the gentleman. However, he then nodded.

That small sign of understanding led the gentleman to ask another question.

“What do they say?”

“Simply that they wish for the National Defense Department to be untouchable.”

“Then they had better show results.”

"I will have them read something from the flow of the world within the week. …The world is in upheaval at the moment. If they predict this accurately, you will trust them."

"If they do, I will approve the creation of the Izumo Aviation Institute's National Defense Department."

"Understood. It would be unprecedented, but they ask to be treated as a shrine belonging to the Imperial Household Department. That way, the ley line alterations can be done as Shinto rituals. They will submit a report once a month as a form of fortune-telling."

The soldier folded up the map.

With the sound of the paper, the past also folded in.

Sayama's consciousness slowly folded toward reality and he awoke.

"Oh."

The next thing he knew, he was sitting on the bench. It seemed Shinjou had seen the same thing while sitting to

his right. Her face was pale and she was looking forward with unfocused eyes.

"Ah…"

Shinjou's shoulders jumped and she turned toward Sayama. He nodded to calm her.

To his left, Ooshiro narrowed his eyes in a smile yet spoke in an indifferent voice.

"It seems the civilization which built Babel had a complete understanding of concept theory. Professor Kinugasa used the knowledge he gained there to perform tests on influencing space with vibration waves. He chose the ley lines for these tests. All of that about protecting the country was mostly an excuse made up for this important person. In the end, it is unknown if they actually read the ley lines or if they merely made educated guesses, but the Izumo Aviation Institute correctly predicted the Nazis taking political control in Germany and Japan withdrawing from the League of Nations. After that, the National Defense Department was created."

"Then was that-…?"

Before Sayama could continue, he was cut off by another voice in front of him.

“That was the beginning.”

“!?”

He reflexively sent a sharp look forward and found two people standing there.

He recognized them.

It was the white-haired man and the maid girl from the Okutama-bound train the day before.

The only difference from then was that the man in a black suit was supporting himself with a cane in his right hand. Just like on the train, the man had a smile on his lips.

“Sounds like they weren’t thinking at all, doesn’t it? It is true the world and Japan are connected by the ley lines . But they did not understand what that called in. At the time, no one knew about the Concept War. If only they had been a little smarter.”

"What a rude man," muttered Sayama as he stood up. "Who are you? Wearing all black and not providing a greeting shows a complete lack of taste and manners."

He felt a tug on his right arm. He turned around to find Shinjou holding his right sleeve.

The ends of her eyebrows were lowered and she was shaking her head.

"That is the supervisor of Team Leviathan. He is Ooshiro Itaru-san, the son of this Ooshiro-san."

"What? This guy with horrible taste is?"

Sayama looked over at the father who was wearing a brown suit and holding salted beef tongue juice. When their gazes met, the man raised his right thumb. Sayama ignored him and turned back to Itaru in this black suit.

"I suppose you can't fight it when bad taste runs in the family…"

"Sayama-kun, that has nothing to do with this," said Shinjou as she tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"I apologize," spoke up the maid standing next to Itaru. She moved in between Itaru and Sayama before looking around the area. "This may be a bother, but would you please listen? I have detected some strange child string vibrations for a while now. They are not registered with me. …They are coming from that direction."

She pointed to the northwest which was to Sayama's right.

The grassy open area was located in that direction. Everyone but them had supposedly been cleared out of that area.

However, some shadows had appeared there at some point.

It was a group of dark green shadows.

The color came from the cloaks they all wore.

There were eleven of them. And it was hard to simply say it was a group of people. Sayama saw some silhouettes that he doubted were human.

…Are these comrades of the werewolf from yesterday?

The maid kept her gaze on them but asked the group from UCAT a question.

"You have no concept weapons or other armaments, correct?"

Ooshiro Kazuo nodded.

"Bringing that sort of thing was your job."

"Tes. The enemy is reading in the child string vibration of us and the surrounding space… They have finished. Our reinforcements waiting below are hurrying here. They will arrive in approximately five minutes. It may be a bother, but please withstand any attacks the enemy might send your way."

"For five minutes?"

"No, for three. …After that, I will use the weapons I have prepared."

"You are quite the courageous maid. What is your name?"

"I am Sf."

Sf gave an expressionless bow and Sayama nodded.

"Your name and master may have terrible taste, but your choice in actions is a different story. I need to make some changes to my estimation of you."

"Thank you very much. …Here comes the Concept Space. It is a standard type using the writing system," she said quietly.

They all turned toward the group of enemies.

A woman standing at the front of the dark green group held up a metal tube-like object in each hand. They were about 30 centimeters long.

"Those are the collections of Concept Texts used by 1st-Gear," said Itaru with a slight smile still on his face.

The woman let go of the metal tubes. They fell through the air and struck the grassy ground.

As soon as they landed, the tubes spread out like blooming flowers.

What appeared from within was…

…Metal plates?

They were small bundles of metal plates that looked like tanzaku.

Some kind of writing appeared to be engraved on the surface of the metal plates and those plates scattered through the air as the tubes bloomed. There were more than several hundred of them and they flew through the air like a blizzard.

The metal plates emitted by the two tubes struck each other, glowed, made noise, and disappeared.

A high-pitched noise could then be heard.

It sounded like a metallophone being played or a bell being rung on the hour. That series of short metallic noises changed to a deep clear noise.

Sayama realized the noise was rushing past them.

And at the same time, he heard a voice. It was the voice that informed him the world was changing. He had heard this voice the previous night when entering the forest and when entering that underground passageway in UCAT. He recognized the voice.

It was his own.

He had not spoken a word, yet he heard a voice similar to his own in his ear.

Sayama spoke. The world worked through him to inform him of the change.

He figured the others must be connected to the world via themselves in the same way. He listened closely and could indeed hear the world saying, “I am changing”.

A few voices he could not quite hear repeated themselves to construct the foundation of this space.

And then an announcement with discernible meaning came. This was the absurd theory created by bringing together countless concepts. This was the Concept Text applied to this Concept Space.

—On this planet, south is down.

—Writing possesses power.

Two voices. This was a combination of more than one Concept Text.

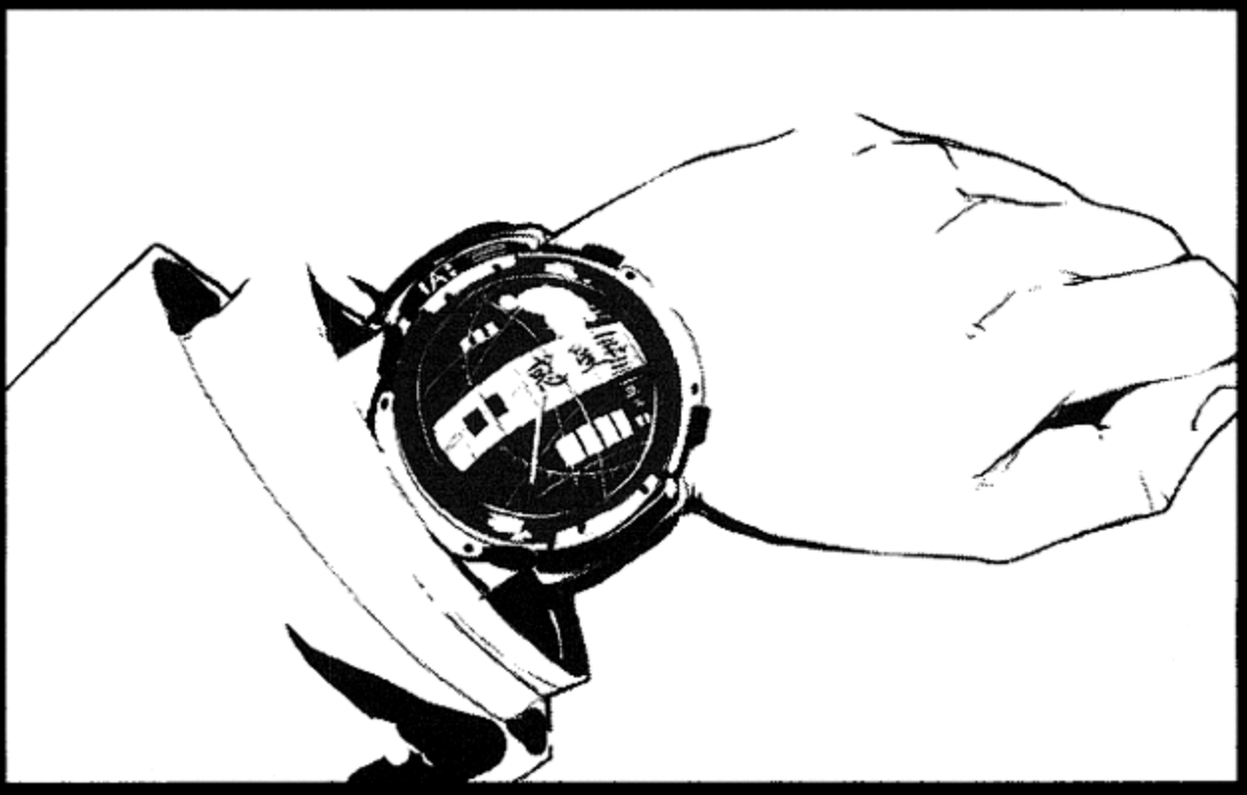
In response, the watch on Sayama's left wrist vibrated. He looked down and saw the words he had heard scrolling across the watch's black face in red text. And the instant after he read those words…

The world literally turned on its side.

Chapter 9: The Circumstances of Justice

Chapter 9

“The Circumstances of Justice”



Difficult things are generally numerous
Easy things are always few
And it is once more time to think

Difficult things are generally numerous

Easy things are always few

And it is once more time to think

Sayama could tell the world had tilted to his left which was to the south. If the voice he had heard was accurate, everything would fall to the south in the Concept Space that had been created.

He grasped his own situation and the situation around him in an instant.

Ahead of him to the west, the only footing was the stones surrounding the grassy area. Behind him, there was the wall of the rest area as well as the tree-covered slope and viewing platform behind the rest area. To the south on his left, there was nothing but the walkway and the trees of the garden.

The only effective footing was the trees behind him.

Sayama immediately picked up Shinjou.

"S-Sayama-kun!?"

He did not have time to respond. Sayama moved to the left and leaped to the trees to the south.

His body fell in an instant.

The ground was already a wall. Sayama landed on one of the tree trunks and leaped toward the slope to the left, toward the viewing platform.

Hurry, he thought.

The reason for this thought came soon thereafter. Shinjou looked up at the rest area from his arms.

"Ah…"

The sound of glass breaking sounded from well above their heads. The counters and tables in the rest area had slid down the tilted ground and crashed into the entrance.

With the ground now a wall, anything not solidly attached would become a falling object.

And they came. The tables that had broken through the rest area door and the benches in the grassy area all fell down.

But it went beyond that. The castle tower foundation to the north had a large stone wall. It crumbled and created a tsunami of giant rocks.

As these falling objects approached, they produced a great roar like the surging waves of the sea.

Sayama ran. Once he approached the eastern slope, he jumped. He was aiming for the trees covering that slope. That would provide somewhere to stand. The railing on the way up the observation platform would make especially good footing.

He leaped.

He silently apologized and threw Shinjou ahead of him into the trees.

After seeing Shinjou land backside-first on one of the trees, Sayama placed his feet on the ground which had become a wall. He lightly kicked off that wall of earth and controlled his posture. He shot up above Shinjou's

head, landed on the trunk of a pine tree, and quickly turned around.

At the same moment, the other three jumped onto trees lower than himself.

Ooshiro Itaru was carried to a nearby tree in Sf's arms.

Ooshiro Kazuo was out of breath and he suddenly realized he still had his drink cup in his hand. Immediately afterwards, the tsunami from the crumbled northern stone wall struck the rest area. It had already made its way across the grassy area.

"…!"

As Shinjou held onto a tree one level below, she visibly ducked down as the earthquake-like noise approached.

It all happened in an instant.

After the roar and cloud of dust passed them by, everything that had been around them previously was gone. The bench they had been sitting on, the trees that had been behind them, and even the rest area had been thoroughly smashed or had vanished.

The roar continued on to the south below them. When it struck the trees down below, some of it passed through and some of it was brought to a stop.

This is a dangerous situation, thought Sayama.

But he immediately denied it. They had escaped their enemy's initial strike. It was not as dangerous as it might have been. They could handle this.

He nodded. And as he did, a dark figure stood up before him.

It was Sf. She stood on a tree trunk and looked toward the open area where most of the grass had been torn up.

"The enemy is coming."

Sayama looked over and found the people wearing dark green cloaks were standing perpendicular to the ground and walking toward them.

"Sf-kun, why can the enemy stand and walk on the ground?"

"They have philosopher's stones. Those are catalytic crystallizations of a concept's string vibration. Anyone

holding one can add concepts without modulating their parent string vibration. They are also used as fuel for concept weapons. The enemy must be holding philosopher's stones made from inferior reproductions of some concept."

Just as she finished speaking, a nearby pine tree trunk suddenly burst.

Sayama looked over, assuming it had been a bullet, but he found a few of the enemies standing still in the center of the open area were holding staff-like objects toward them.

He then heard a voice. It belonged to the man who seemed to be their leader. He wore dark green armor underneath his dark green cloak, so he looked like a knight.

"Are you coming!?" he shouted.

However, Sayama heard another shout duplicated over that one. This other shout was in a language that's pronunciation was somehow similar to German. Sayama grasped that this was the language the man was actually speaking. Some sort of mutual understanding concept was in effect.

"That's a convenient power."

"As long as it is not used incorrectly," agreed Sf.

Ooshiro Itaru then shouted from below.

"Hey, Sf."

Three meters below where Shinjou sat one trunk below them, Ooshiro Kazuo sat on a tree trunk. Next to the old man, his son lay in his black suit on the railing heading up the observation platform. His legs were crossed and his arms were folded behind his head.

"Hurry it up. I'm gonna hold you to those 3 minutes."

"Tes. Then take this, Sayama-sama."

Sf pulled a black metal object out of her pocket. It was a handgun.

"That looks like a perfectly normal handgun to me."

"The bullets are anti-1st-Gear weapons. They possess the power of writing that 1st-Gear's parent concept provides. Objects defined by writing possess a stronger

existence and are given power. As was stated previously …"

Sf pulled a handkerchief and fountain pen from her pocket and wrote a word on the handkerchief. Specifically, "fire".

And then…

"It's…burning?"

The area written on grew brown, then black, and finally burned away.

"The more expressive the handwritten words, the more the words' power will be embodied in the object. Any phenomenon possible under that world's concept can be made a reality. However, invincibility, immortality, and resurrection are not possible in any Gear. …When fighting under their concepts, your armaments will not have their proper power unless they have writing engraved into them."

"What do this gun's bullets say?"

"Every bullet has "bullet, one more hit" written on it. If you hit once, the next shot will automatically home in

on the target. Try to use that effectively. I must retrieve the equipment I left at the café. They had a String Watch with them, so they will have been brought into the Concept Space."

"Wouldn't they have fallen with the rocks earlier?"

"No, I did not observe them among the fallen debris. I believe they were swept among the remaining garden trees on the northern slope. …I will have them in three minutes."

"So you want me to hold the enemies' attention until then?"

"Tes. You are not currently my top priority, Sayama-sama. I must ask you to take this job. By the way , my order of precedence runs Itaru-sama, Shinjou-sama, Sayama-sama, and in a very distant last place, Kazuo-sama."

"Wait. Why are you treating me so differently?" asked Ooshiro.

"Family comes last, you damn old man. Get going, Sf. If I die, it's your fault," said Itaru.

"Tes. If that is your desire, I will grant it later."

Sf circled around behind Sayama and began moving upwards. She worked her way up by grabbing onto the tree trunks growing from the earth wall, pulling herself up onto them, and swinging her body to balance herself. The tree-covered slope had originally grown from a low hill, so it looked like an overhang when looking up at it. Sf chose to remain in the shadow of the hill to hide her ascent from the enemies.

Sayama was filled with wonder over how precisely and quickly Sf moved, but he suddenly noticed the weight of the gun in his hand. He shrugged and looked down to find Shinjou blushing as she followed Sf's movements above.

"What is it? Why are you blushing?"

"Eh? Oh, um, she was standing on the tree directly above me, remember? And, well, sh-she's surprisingly adult?"

"What do you mean by adult?"

Sayama grinned bitterly as he looked down. Shinjou did not have a weapon, Ooshiro Itaru showed absolutely

zero intention of fighting, and Ooshiro Kazuo was too old to count on in a fight.

Shinjou looked toward the open area and shouted, " Ah, here they come!"

So they're here, thought Sayama as he placed the hand holding the gun against the wall next to him. He nodded and decided he needed some kind of plan. He needed a way of fighting despite the poor footing.

He suddenly looked to his right. He was holding his right arm out straight against the wall made from the ground.

He then looked down at his feet. His was standing atop a root next to the wall.

"So down is determined by the planet's south."

"…Eh? What about it? Doesn't that just mean the ground is a cliff like this?"

"There is a hole in the theory," said Sayama with a grin.

He looked down and both Itaru and Ooshiro were grinning as well.

"I see. It looks like the crueler of us have caught on. But our enemy has not. And even you are viewing it wrong. If we can draw in the enemy and take advantage of this, we might be able to pull something off here."

The group from 1st-Gear's Royal Palace faction was made up of eleven people. They were spread out in a fan shape around the woods their target was hiding in. The knight who was their leader was at the front. He was flanked on either side by two attendants who were over three meters tall. They were members of some large race of beings. Beyond the attendants were two woman hidden below a cloak and holding a wooden staff. Behind each of them were two men wearing square bonnets for a total of four.

And at the very back of each row was an archer. The two of them had removed their cloaks to reveal four wings on their backs. Their wings vibrated, drawing in air from the front and blowing it behind them. Both of them tilted their bodies backwards at almost the exact

same moment. It was as if they were throwing themselves to the ground or lying down. And as soon as their four wings were level with the ground…

"!"

The sound of wind burst from their backs.

Their four wings gave a single strike. And that send them flying up into the blue sky above their heads.

Once they reached a height of 15 meters, they took a position of leaning back only slightly. They tilted their wings behind them to hover in place, aimed their bows toward the woods, and pulled back the string without nocking an arrow.

The knight at the head of the group below the archers threw open the front of his cloak to show his arms.

He held a long rifle in his right hand and a shield in his left. The rifle was made of wood and metal. Instead of a magazine, a black hardcover book was sticking into the top of the rifle. The book was made of canvas material instead of paper.

A white beard moved underneath the knight's helm as he spoke.

"If you give no response, we will continue to advance on you!"

He began to take a step with his long boots.

But then two figures appeared, standing perpendicular to the side of a tree trunk at the front of the woods.

In the front was an elderly man in a brown suit. Behind him was a boy in a gray suit.

The boy gently pushed the old man forward.

The man's lean figure was forced to jump down from the woods and into the open.

The knight froze in place for an instant. That open area was a sheer cliff to his enemies.

For a moment, the knight almost looked up to the archers in the sky. However, he stopped himself.

The old man stood as if clinging to the ground.

He was on the very edge of the lawn area. A slight curb stuck up there.

The old man was standing tiptoe on that narrow curb while clinging to the ground.

Next, the boy in the suit jumped down. He held a paper cup with a straw.

As they both clung to the ground, they moved around three meters closer along the stone curb.

At a distance of approximately five meters, the two of them stopped.

The elderly man lightly raised his hands. He looked up at the knight and the others while in a position similar to lying on the asphalt ground. He had a troubled smile on his face.

“Hi there. Sorry about this, but could you leave for a bit?”

“No, we cannot,” immediately replied the knight quietly.

The boy standing next to the elderly man spoke in response.

"Oh, I think you can."

Sayama looked up at the knight standing on the wall to his left. He could not see his eyes through the face of his helm, but he could see his mouth. While focusing on trying to pick up on his expression, Sayama inwardly sighed.

…So he is at least reasonable enough to speak with.

From the speed of the knight's reply and the calm in his voice, Sayama concluded the man was relatively experienced.

With some tension in his expression, Sayama said, "If you did not intend for us to discuss something, you would not have prepared a concept that allows us to understand each other. It seems to me you have some objective other than killing us."

In response, the knight aimed his long rifle at him.

"What if that objective is having you beg for your life?"

"Then I would be amazed at how little difference there is between knights and bandits these days."

"We are fighting for revenge. …We simply want those who must be punished to realize the value of life. Do you think bandits would be so merciful?"

"Are you the one that gets to determine what is merciful? If not, who do you think does?"

The knight's mouth stiffened at that. Sayama noticed, but he continued speaking with the same expression as before.

"Do you understand where it is you stand here? Is it a scene of revenge or is it the stage of a turning point in history? If it is the latter, what do you think decides everything here? If you think it is you, you should go burn every single history book you can find. There would be no point in anyone reading them."

The knight kept his rifle aimed at Sayama and did not move.

Sayama could see his finger on a button that was likely the trigger.

Sayama asked, “What exactly is a merciful knight? I thought it was someone who actually carried out merciful actions rather than someone who simply understood what was generally considered to be merciful. Am I wrong?”

“…”

With a bitter smile, the knight removed his finger from the rifle’s trigger. Sayama bowed.

“I thank you for your mercy.”

“It is only natural. *However*, what do you hope for in a situation such as this?”

Sayama moved his aching left arm and placed the paper cup in his left hand on Ooshiro’s shoulder.

“Are you listening?” he said to the knight. “Ooshiro Kazuo here is the head of Japanese UCAT. His brain is filled with all sorts of valuable information. And as he has aged, his endurance has weakened, making it easier to get information out of him.”

"Hmph," muttered Ooshiro as he glanced over at Sayama.

Sayama only ignored him.

"Ooshiro Kazuo here has not shown himself in public much recently, but today he is here in person at the Imperial Palace and even wearing normal clothes. As a special service, I will now-…"

"Are you trying to use him as a hostage?" asked the knight.

"No," replied Sayama.

Sayama held up the drink cup with his hurting left arm. He held it next to Ooshiro's face. The cup had the word "poison" written on it with a fountain pen and the straw was already sticking into Ooshiro's right ear.

The knight clenched his teeth when he saw it. Sayama looked directly at the face of the knight's helm and spoke .

"I will now give this valuable item a public execution. Perhaps."

Sayama saw the knight take a step toward him without thinking.

But the knight stopped there.

After glancing back toward his comrades behind him, he spoke.

“Such foolishness.” He gave a bitter smile. “Kill him if you wish. That simply saves us the effort.”

“Even if Ooshiro Kazuo here rethinks his pitiful character and seeks asylum with 1st-Gear?”

“Enough nonsense!” shouted the knight and Ooshiro gave a start.

He shouted out, “Help meeeeee! I don’t want to diiiiie! What am I supposed to do!? Ow ow ow ow ow!”

Sayama lifted up the foot he had used to stomp on Ooshiro’s foot.

He then whispered, “Old man, you’re giving this too much effort.”

The knight was bending over to stare at them more closely.

Not good. I chose the wrong person, thought Sayama. *Shinjou probably would have been better.*

He wondered what kind of scream she would have let out. What would it have sounded like? He regretted missing out on that.

…Is it too late to turn back now!? Well, I can save that for some other time.

With that last thought, Sayama quickly refocused his attention.

He made sure the knight could see he was giving the cup in his left hand a light squeeze.

"What will you do? I am ready to go ahead with this," he said so as not to give the knight any longer to think.

Sayama had determined the knight was not actually after a battle.

It was likely because they had learned the leader of UCAT would be here that they had come to the Imperial Palace. That meant they were after Ooshiro Kazuo. Sayama decided they had intentionally created a situation where Ooshiro could not move so they could speak with him and have him take a certain action.

…Most likely, they either want to abduct him or force him to sign some sort of agreement.

As Sayama nodded in his heart, he spoke to the knight.

"Listen carefully. If you try to harm any of us, I will put an end to this old man. That means it is your responsibility if his pitiable life is taken."

"…But you are the one trying to kill him."

"Yet you are not trying to stop me from doing so, Sir Knight." Sayama spoke that last word with enough force to make the knight grit his teeth. He went on to say, " You announced you were merciful, so are you really going to do nothing as poison is poured into a poor old man's ear, as he dances around in pain, and as he finally dies? If that happens, UCAT will start by punishing me. However, they will blame you as well. And that blame will spread until it affects all of the survivors of 1st-Gear. " He took a breath. "How is that merciful? You are a knight in name only. …You can lose all trust and live a life of being scorned if you wish. And it will all be for your victory here, Sir Knight."

"Mh," groaned the knight. "Is that poison real?"

"Do you not trust in the power of your own Gear? It even has pieces of the main ingredient inside to ensure the contents are 100% effective."

"100% effective, you say?"

"Yes," nodded Sayama.

He pulled a fountain pen out of his pocket and wrote another word on the cup. Above “poison” he wrote “ amazing”.

“What do you think of this amazing poison? It has plenty of iron, so it’s perfect for when you finish exercising. What will you do?”

But after drawing back from Sayama’s words for an instant, the knight said, “Wait.”

He lowered his stance, took a breath, and spoke.

“I was just about to be deceived with my own Gear’s laws. Think about this.” He held up his long rifle once more. After aiming it at Sayama, he proclaimed, “You are writing on the container. I highly doubt Low-Gear has constructed a means of transferring the effects of the words to the liquid inside. The contents are nothing but a normal liquid.”

“Do you want to test that?”

Sayama smiled and the knight stopped moving once more.

After allowing a short silence, Sayama asked a further question.

"Can you take responsibility if you test this and white smoke begins spilling from this old man's ear? Dissolve the brain, and any human will die. The same goes for any dog or monkey too, of course."

The knight lightly bent his body back when he heard that. His bearded mouth formed a smile.

"Heh," laughed the knight from his nose. "Hmph. Go right ahead. And as soon your threat has proven empty, I will shoot you."

The smile the knight formed along with his words told Sayama something.

Their acting had been too over the top. And so he took action.

"Then I shall."

With a quick movement of the fountain pen in his right hand, Sayama added "container for" above " amazing poison". When Ooshiro saw that, his eyes truly opened wide.

"Ah," he started. "Ahhhhh! Stop that!! This wasn't part of the plan!!"

"Shut up. Quiet down. It is all over for you. Just do as you are told and scream. Oh, and cry too."

Just as Sayama pushed the cup with his left hand to pour the liquid, someone reacted to the last thing Ooshiro had said.

It was the knight.

The smile from before had completely disappeared from the knight's lips.

"Stop!" he shouted.

He covered the distance between them in an instant.

It only took him two steps. After covering five meters that quickly, he skidded to a halt along the dirt ground.

His shoes could be heard digging into the ground, his cloak flipped up, and he sent out a blast of wind.

His dark green cloak shook and the armor and equipment below created repeated metallic noises. But he came to stop there.

He was already directly in front of Sayama. He held his long rifle out toward the boy.

Sayama raised his head and looked up from his position clinging to the ground that was a wall.

The knight aimed his rifle from so close Sayama could reach out and grab it. He aimed at Sayama, not Ooshiro.

That told him that the knight's target was definitely Ooshiro.

He could see writing on the cover of the book loaded into the top of the gun. The writing resembled the alphabet, but was a different language. He could not read it, but he could understand what it meant. It said " Investigation Report on the Destruction of the Wotan Kingdom".

Is that a report on the destruction of 1st-Gear? asked Sayama silently. *I remember reading a story involving a king with that name.*

The title of the story was on the tip of his tongue, but this was not the situation to try to remember it in.

He could see a bluish-white light leaking from between the book's pages. The light seemed to be pulsating.

As he watched that light, Sayama asked, "What is the matter, Sir Knight? I thought I was saving you the effort of killing him?"

"…What do you want?"

"Currently, I want to pour this amazing poison into this old man's ear. Is that a problem?"

"I am telling you to stop."

"And I am telling you I do not want to."

"Why?"

Ooshiro nodded in agreement with the knight's question.

"Y-yes, why do you want to do this, Mikoto-kun?"

"Shut up, old man. …Sir Knight, let me ask you instead: what do you want?"

After a pause, the knight replied, "Revenge."

Sayama nodded in his heart and thought.

…That may be the truth, but he knows it will never actually happen.

As he thought, Sayama looked at the people behind the knight. Including the knight, there were eleven in total. They were all surrounded by a tense atmosphere, but they were also all quite old.

They clearly had no younger options to choose from.

Even if they fought here and won, they did not have the strength of an organization that was needed for an ultimate victory. That was why they planned to take a hostage in this battle before moving to their true stage: the negotiating table.

"…"

Sayama looked at the knight's white beard. 1st-Gear's destruction had apparently been around the same time as World War Two. That was 60 years ago.

Their desire at the time had been revenge. But what was it now?

The word "remnant" flashed through Sayama's mind.

But that caused him to brace himself. Those with nothing to lose could be quite frightening.

And so he chose his words carefully as he spoke next.

"We will be holding preliminary negotiations with 1st-Gear's peaceful faction tomorrow. Your actions here will be taken into account then, so could you perhaps fall back for now?"

"You want us to retreat?"

"Can a knight's sword not be sheathed? If you do not sheathe your sword, a grudge will be held against all the people of 1st-Gear in any negotiations held afterwards. And that includes everyone you stand for."

"There are times when one cannot sheathe his sword for reasons of pride. Am I wrong?"

After hearing that calm request for confirmation, Sayama let out a breath.

…This is the crucial moment.

He thought and finally said, "Does your pride only exist for your own sake? Or is it for the sake of all those waiting for you?"

The knight pursed his lips at Sayama's question.

He did not speak, but the sound of his teeth grinding leaked from his jaw. However…

"…"

The knight's rifle barrel shook slightly. His white beard moved as he opened his mouth to speak.

"What does a boy from this lowly Gear know of the pride of a 1st-Gear knight?"

Without even a smile, Sayama shook his head.

"I only asked you a question concerning your pride. I am asking you to make up for my lack of knowledge on the subject." He took a breath. "Now tell me. What is your pride? Tell me as calmly as you can."

The knight's moustache formed a small smile at that.

And he began to lower his rifle.

Just as he did, he suddenly looked up and tension filled his entire body.

"…!"

The knight took a step back and turned an intense look in Sayama's direction.

However, the eyes below the helm were not looking at Sayama's face. They were looking beyond him, to the south of the large open space.

Sayama turned to look in the same direction.

Amid the trees to the south that had taken a lot of damage from the falling stone wall, a single small black form was visible.

It was a black cat.

The cat sat on a pine tree trunk just as the UCAT group had done. It was staring up at them. However, Sayama was certain that the knight had reacted to that black cat.

Sayama felt he had seen the cat somewhere before, but he shook his head.

…This is not the time for that.

He turned back toward the knight to find everything wrapped in tension. All eleven of the people spread out in front of him were starting at the black cat and holding their breath.

Their silence felt as if it could burst at any time. And it was finally broken by a word from the knight.

"Sorry."

He spoke with his eyes cast down, but he had not been speaking to Sayama.

Nevertheless, he quickly raised the long rifle, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

At the same instant, Sayama took action.

Shinjou clearly saw tension run through the group from where she was amid the trees.

She looked in the direction the 1st-Gear group was looking and spotted a black cat.

"What is that?"

Itaru spoke from below where he sat on the railing leading up to the viewing platform.

"A familiar used by a 1st-Gear sorcerer. They're used to contact people. In other words, these idiots were being observed and they only now realized it. That means they can no longer run away." He smiled bitterly. "After the destruction of 1st-Gear, its residents split into three factions in Low-Gear. Fasolt's peaceful faction, the Royal

Palace faction that split off with Concept Space technology, and the City faction that has the mechanical dragon named Fafnir Custom. This is the Royal Palace faction that has no real distinguishing characteristics. … Almost makes me feel bad for my old man. He's being forced to act so desperately against these small fries."

"Why does everyone around me say such horrible things about their parents…?"

Shinjou frowned and sighed where Itaru could not see her. She held the handgun Sayama had left with her. The weight and coldness of the black metal did not warm up even in her tight grip. She simply could not get used to the feel of it. However…

"He left this with me."

Sayama had asked her to let the knights walk toward him. And if the negotiations failed, he had said he would raise his right hand. Then she was to fire.

Currently, the knight stood at the head of the enemy's fan-shaped formation and he was facing Sayama. If the negotiations failed, Sayama's plan was for her to fire at him.

From where Shinjou was, Sayama was about 15 meters forward and 5 meters down. That was at about the limit of what an amateur could hope to hit with a handgun.

The ballistic trajectory would drop. With a handgun's weak rotation, a slight margin of error would definitely exist.

And the knight held a shield on his left arm. That shield was in her way. However…

"If the negotiations fail, he will have the knight move his shield to leave him open in this direction."

Could she do it? Shinjou tilted her head, but abandoned the question.

The situation was desperate. The knight took a step back and lowered his head slightly.

"_____"

He said something she could not hear and held up his long rifle.

At the same moment, Sayama moved.

He waved his left arm toward the knight. The paper cup in that hand flew toward the knight while scattering its contents. The knight held his shield up to knock away the cup.

Shinjou stared at the half of the knight's body that was now wide open.

Sayama raised his right hand. That was the signal.

"Now!"

Shinjou aimed and squeezed the trigger. She aimed for his body. That was her limit.

But a sudden voice came from below.

"Why aren't you aiming for the head? …You always have been soft."

It was Itaru. And he did not stop speaking there.

"If you shoot at his body, his armor will deflect it. If you do not kill the knight, *he* might die."

Her hands holding the grip began trembling at the word "he".

Shinjou suddenly recalled what had happened the previous night. She recalled the instant in which she had been unable to do anything.

And so she tightened her grip on the trigger. She tried to fire as soon as possible.

She squeezed it. And at the same moment, Itaru shouted at her. His powerful tone of voice lacked any hint of a smile.

"Kill him!!"

Shinjou's shoulders shook and she squeezed the trigger. But that action did nothing.

There was no gunshot, no recoil, and no bullet flying out. There was nothing.

As she had tried to pull the trigger, the grip had fallen from her hands. Her grip had no strength. The handgun hung down from her fingertips by the trigger guard as her opened hands trembled.

She could not fire. And as soon as she realized that…

"Ah!"

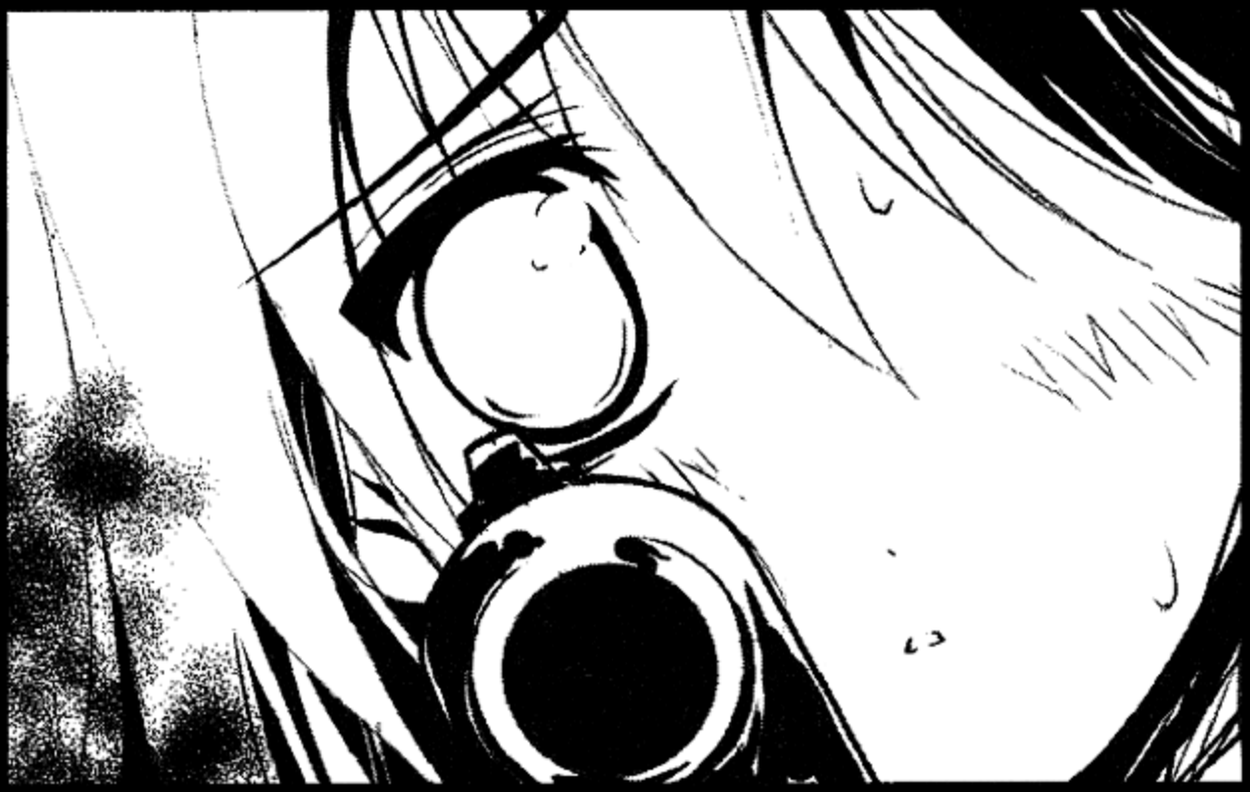
The trembling of her hands spread to her shoulders.

In the next moment, she heard a gunshot that had not come from her gun.

Chapter 10: Development of Will

Chapter 10

“Development of Will”



Is hesitation feigned goodness or is it courage?
Then is determination feigned evil or is it recklessness?
Neither one is a bad thing

Is hesitation feigned goodness or is it courage?

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Neither one is a bad thing

The knight swung his shield and deflected the liquid.

When the pale yellow liquid struck the metal shield, smoke rose from it. A hole was eaten into the surface of the shield.

“That is quite a deadly poison!” commented the knight .

“You were really going to pour that into my ear!?” added Ooshiro.

The knight ignored the old man and silently squeezed the trigger of his long rifle.

Bluish-white light emitted from the side of the book loaded into the gun.

That bookshelf rifle drew out the meaning of that collection of words in the form of heat.

It was a more primitive method than adding a new ability with the words, but it was plenty powerful.

He fired.

A ball of light shot from the rifle's barrel. However, he was not targeting either of those lying on the ground below him.

He targeted the black cat.

In the amount of time known as an instant, the bright yellow bullet grew to 5 meters across and travelled in a shallow arc to the south side of the grassy area.

The reverberation of electrical discharge was drowned out by the sound of destruction when it struck.

It exploded.

"!"

The southern end of the grassy area grew warped, crumbled, and then shrank inwardly, trees and dirt included.

In the next instant, everything within a 20 meter square was blasted up into the sky.

A tremendous roar was heard.

The knight said, “I doubt that was enough.”

He then turned toward the two below him.

“Now! I will handle the two of you. Even if this sullies my name, seeing this through is how I show my pride!”

The boy lying on the ground then muttered something .

“So you have decided what path you will take as well, have you?”

“What?” asked the knight.

However, he quickly lifted his rifle again and focused on the battle.

The book loaded in the rifle was already emitting bluish-white light from all of its pages.

If he squeezed the trigger, he could eliminate the two people clinging to a sheer cliff.

"I am sorry," said the knight.

Unexpectedly, the boy answered him.

"There is no need to apologize."

As he spoke, the boy suddenly stood up.

He stood atop the ground which should have been a cliff to him. He placed his feet on the ground and stood while keeping his body low.

"What…!?" The knight drew back. He held back up his shield and shouted, "Damn you! Have you added the same concept as us!?"

Without replying, the boy ran.

The knight's comrades began to move and prepare to attack, but it was too late.

The boy circled around to the knight's left which was the north. The knight tried to follow the boy's motion with his rifle, but he did not make it in time.

With his back turned, the boy jumped lightly up.

He performed a reverse roundhouse kick.

It hit home.

His heel struck the knight's left shoulder with more weight than expected.

The knight's bones creaked and his body was lifted up.

"Kh."

He endured the pain and lowered his hips to land properly. He tried to aim the rifle in his right arm toward the boy, but his body felt numb and he could only aim to the front.

While remaining on guard for another kick, the knight rotated his entire body. He held his shield toward the boy.

He found the boy landing from his kick on all fours.

He then gently lifted his body a bit before running. He circled around to the north once more.

When the knight tried to follow him, one of the giant attendants shouted out from behind him.

“Look!”

The knight turned toward the deep voice and found the old man named Ooshiro moving to the south of the grassy area. His stance was low, but he was definitely running.

“How?” muttered the knight.

South was set as down, so the ground should have been perfectly vertical.

He and his companions were only able to stand due to the effects of the philosopher’s stones they held. Their enemies should not have had any of their own, yet they were still running around on that vertical ground.

“How!?”

To the north of the grassy open area, a line of trees had escaped the destruction of the stone wall.

It now functioned as footing stretching out perpendicular to the ground. On one of the tree trunks, the battle beginning far below was visible. Sf stood there carrying a single café set.

She held a parasol, a portable cooler, a table, and chairs. She skillfully placed them on the tree trunk as she heard the knight's question from far below: How?

Sf gave a small nod.

She pulled a single bullet from her pocket. On its side, the words "bullet, one more hit" were written.

"You made a mistake in your theory."

She placed the bullet atop the table which was sitting on the line of trees.

The bullet remained still at first, but it eventually accelerated and began rolling.

"That area may appear to be a wall, but it is actually a slope," said Sf as if to confirm it. "Setting south as down

was a naïve decision but not a surprising one for a resident of a flat world such as 1st-Gear. …After all, the earth is round and Japan is located on the northern hemisphere."

Sf looked at the grassy area below her. Sayama charged into the center of the enemy ranks and was fighting while focusing on evasion. He was running along a slope of about 40 degrees while repeatedly evading and attacking.

Sayama's method of attack was simple. He would circle around to the north of his enemy, choose an attack method such as a direct kick or roundhouse kick that would make full use of his body weight, and then directed it toward his enemy down the slope to the south .

Sayama had no choice but to stand on a slope.

He had to keep his stance low, but this made it easier to avoid his enemy's attacks. When he was cornered, he could jump far to the south, using the slope to gain more distance. Sf nodded as she watched on.

"To forestall an initial attack from his enemy, he pressed down against the slope, pretending it was a wall."

As she spoke, Sf placed the cooler's strap over her right shoulder and held the parasol in her hand.

She suddenly looked up to find a winged archer had noticed her.

"Oh, dear," said Sf as she opened the cooler.

The archer above brought a hand to his bowstring. The center of the string had a single piece of cloth attached. The cloth had words written on it. The archer drew the bowstring and an arrow of light appeared between the cloth and the bow.

Instead of firing right away, the archer twisted the cloth to the right.

The string grew tauter and the bow creaked, but the arrow of light multiplied to three.

Finally, the archer fired.

The sound of the light being released sounded similar to a flute.

As that high-pitched trio rained down from the sky, Sf bowed slightly.

"Thank you for such an ordinary attack. As thanks, I shall provide a common attack of my own."

She pulled what looked like two long metal staffs from the cooler.

The two objects appearing from below the canned drinks were a machine gun and its barrel.

She attached the heavy barrel with one hand and loaded the ammunition belt. The first bullet was instantly brought into the chamber.

"Over 40,000 have been produced. That should be common enough."

With that comment, Sf aimed into the sky and squeezed the trigger.

Sayama could tell he was being surrounded. His enemies were once more beginning to hold him in check.

The old men wearing square bonnets who looked like priests and the old women wearing hoods who looked like magicians were clearly keeping their distance while the two giant attendants began circling around to his north. They were preventing him from taking his advantageous position.

But Sayama felt that was fine as sweat flew from his brow.

At the very least, he had drawn the enemies away from the woods were Shinjou was and Ooshiro Kazuo had been able to escape.

That meant he need not worry about this battleground. And he had another thought.

…I was right. Shinjou-kun did not fire.

When he had attacked the knight, he had given the signal, but Shinjou had not fired. He had predicted it, but it was still a slight shock.

She really does continue to surprise me, he thought as he walked around.

"Shinjou-kun is serious about everything," he muttered. "Even when she hesitates."

It was because she took this so seriously that she had been unable to pull the trigger this time as well.

Sayama suddenly recalled what had happened that morning. He recalled Ooki's words to him.

…When those who rarely get serious finally do get serious, they can draw out a lot of power. Is that it?

"And thinking that you cannot get serious means you are constantly thinking about getting serious."

Sayama decided Shinjou had to have reached that stage.

…But what about me?

"Will I ever-…"

Would he ever get serious?

His questioning gaze caught sight of the end of a magician's staff glowing. Instead of leaving behind an afterimage of the light, it looked more like the word was being burned into the atmosphere. Sayama did not recognize the word, but he could read it.

It meant fire.

He leaped as soon as he read it. He leaped south down the slope.

In the next instant, a pillar of fire shot up in the spot he had just been standing in.

As he heard the air burning, crimson flames shot up in a triple helix. The end of the spiral bloomed outwards and scattered through the air as the pillar of fire energetically came apart and disappeared.

Sayama landed.

At the same moment, Sayama realized the enemy's formation was complete.

The priests and magicians to his north split to the left and right. The two giants traveled down the center of that group. They were approximately three meters tall.

Under their dark green cloaks, those attendants wore light armor and were armed with black knives.

They could not make tight turns, but they used easily-wielded knives to cover for that disadvantage.

They came.

Sayama prepared himself. He could not defeat them head on. He needed to run around them. He lowered his body and sucked in a breath. He suddenly glanced over at his hard-to-move left arm and his left hand.

He saw the scars on his hand and the ring on his finger .

He tried to clench his left fist, but received only stabbing pain.

It was a phantom pain, but it felt real to him. And he could not swing the fist regardless.

An instant later, Sayama looked up from his left hand and ran.

He shrank down, stretched out, and sent his body forward.

At the same moment, he spotted a shadow coming from the sky above.

It was an archer.

Not good, he muttered silently.

His enemies were not planning to have the giant attendants attack him.

They would surround him and he would be shot from the air.

"Kh."

Sayama took in a breath and twisted his body around.

To avoid the coming attack as much as possible, he rolled along the ground.

But what fell to the ground was not an arrow or even a bow.

It was wings.

"!"

With the sound of flesh being struck, a giant four-winged form fell to the ground where Sayama had been a moment before. It was the archer who had been in the sky. Sayama could see red blood spewing from the base of his upper right wing.

Sayama got up on his knees and heard a certain sound before he could even wonder what was going on.

He heard gunfire.

He looked up. He looked to the north which was up to him.

In the sky there, another set of wings fell.

The four-winged archer fell into the woods to the east while staining his wings with red blood.

Only then did everyone look over.

A white and black figure was jumping down from a distant line of trees to the north.

"Sf-kun…"

She held a machinegun in her left hand, a parasol in her right, and a large cooler under her right arm.

Despite carrying two objects that looked too large for her body size, she was not running down the slope. She leaped through the sky.

She did not seem to care that one of the four-winged archers had fallen among some nearby trees.

She dropped down.

In the next instant, one of the magicians reacted. She wrote several words in the air, turned them into spears of light, and threw them at Sf.

The light flew with a high-pitched dash.

Sf took a single action in response. She held up the parasol in her right arm and opened it. With the sound of the wind being struck, Sf's body appeared to be lifted up by the parasol as she began to float.

The spears of light passed by below her feet and stabbed into the grass in the distance.

Just as the spears of light could be heard bursting in the distance, Sf let go of the parasol.

After that, she travelled in a straight line.

Guided by gravitational acceleration, Sf's heels crashed into the giant attendant who was on the left from Sayama's perspective.

The impact caused a great noise.

"…!"

She sent all of her weight into both legs as they struck the attendant's side and his body was knocked up into the air. Sayama backed away as the attendant rotated around in midair and slammed into the ground headfirst.

Repeated powerful sounds were heard as his armor and flesh crashed to the ground, but he eventually came to a stop.

The attendant no longer moved.

Instead, the slender woman who had only just now arrived on the scene moved.

She had short white hair and she wore a black dress with a white apron. Her silhouette spread out with the hem of her skirt and she bowed before Sayama.

"I am glad to see you are the same as ever."

It was Sf.

Sayama glanced around. As Sf greeted him, the enemies were once more falling into formation around them.

The knight entered to replace the lost attendant and the two magicians moved back.

As they watched her, Sf opened the cooler and stuck her left hand inside. The formation of enemies prepared themselves as the sound of ice and water came from the cooler.

However, Sf was not looking at them. She was crouched down and looking toward Sayama.

"Sayama-sama, take this. It is a new product that is perfect for breaks between exercise."

She handed him a plastic sports drink bottle. He took it and she bowed before sticking her left hand in the cooler.

"The rest of you can have this," she said as she pulled out a black, glittering submachine gun.

She rotated around, firing all the while.

"!"

At the sound of gunfire, the attendant, knight, and other enemies frantically held up their shields or gauntlets.

But they were too slow.

As metallic noises rang out, they were either forced back or blown away.

Sayama stood up. Bluish-white smoke surrounded him and Sf. The formation around them had widened slightly and one magician lay collapsed on the ground. Sayama looked toward the magician while opening the lid of the drink bottle.

"She is not dead. As expected, they have some form of defensive power. This is not causing much damage."

Sayama realized Sf's right sleeve was torn. That showed she had already received some sort of attack. And the arm he saw below the torn black cloth was…

"A machine?" asked Sayama after a citrus flavor flowed into his mouth from the bottle.

Sf's arm was made of what looked like narrow pearl-colored armor. The arm narrowed in considerably at the elbow joint between her upper arm and lower arm and only black plastic filled the gap.

Without turning around, Sf tossed the submachine gun to the ground.

"I am Sein Frau, an automaton created by German UCAT using 3rd-Gear technology. My body was put together for Itaru-sama's exclusive use, so I am able to do the shopping or receive guests in bad weather and under inconvenient circumstances. My compact exterior can run for 24 hours if the philosopher's stone is swapped out, so even the most sudden of unreasonable demands can be-…"

"Enough with the late-night infomercial sales pitch," said Sayama as he handed the empty drink bottle back to Sf. And then, "What are your combat abilities?"

"According to German UCAT, the German people are the most excellent people in the world. I was created using their technology, so my combat abilities are top notch."

"Didn't that 'most excellent' right-wing country lose World War Two?"

"Truly excellent people need not desire victory. Victory is not needed in the eternal quest to grow stronger."

"Who said that?"

"I do not know. However, it has been etched into my mind."

As she spoke, Sf moved the machinegun in her right hand to her left and placed the muzzle against the ground. She moved the muzzle to the side so that it drew a curve in the dirt.

"My name is Sein Frau, 'the woman who should exist'. I am a nonhuman who was born from the desire to 'exist'. Now, come and bring the reason for your birth with you. If that reason is weaker than mine, you will not even be able to 'exist'."

終わりのクロニクル

With a turn of her heel, she transformed the curve on the ground into a ring.

"I was created for the sake of my master. I sacrifice my steel for his bones, my chains for his flesh, my oil for his blood, and my determination for his heart. But there is one thing he has for which I have nothing to sacrifice."

When the ring connected, she placed the gun's muzzle on the point of connection.

"His tears. …As I have no emotions, I have nothing to give in return for those. As such, I do not desire my master's tears. I desire only an outcome that requires no teardrops."

She raised the gun.

"Steel for his bones, chains for his flesh, oil for his blood, determination for his heart, and…"

She took a breath.

"Selflessness for his tears."

As she spoke, Sf squeezed the trigger while aiming at the line of enemies.

Shinjou sat on a tree trunk.

The trembling of her hands was beginning to abate, but strength would not return to her fingers.

"What do I…" she muttered.

…lack at times like this? she finished in her thoughts.

She heard a voice from below.

"You had excellent scores in training and your marksmanship while providing covering fire from the rear guard was quite good as well. But it looks like you're no good on the vanguard where a real battle is right before your eyes. Do you think I should remove you from Team Leviathan, Shinjou?"

Shinjou gave a quick gasp.

But the voice from below laughed.

"Hah. What's with the serious look? I may be the supervisor, but you know I can't do everything on my own discretion, right? You were added as a member on the recommendation of my old man. I can't move you without his permission and your agreement."

Shinjou frowned at the laughing voice and clenched her back teeth.

"Why are you always like this!? Ever since you took me in…"

"You really want to know?" said a smiling voice. "It's because I know everything but understand nothing." The voice then changed the subject. "Look, the fools are in trouble. Do whatever you can."

Shinjou looked out toward the grassy area and realized what he meant.

Sayama and Sf moved around amid the gunfire and their enemies were collapsing from the attacks.

But a few of those had begun to move once more. First was the attendant Sf had defeated. He was trying to stand. And he was hidden behind another enemy, so Sayama and Sf could not see him.

Shinjou stood up on the tree trunk.

“Sayama-kun!”

As the knight charged toward her from the front, Sf charged in with her right shoulder held forward.

With the cooler still held under her right arm, she filled the gap between her and the knight in an instant.

The knight aimed his long rifle at her.

Sf raised the machinegun in her left arm slightly before swinging it.

She slammed her own machinegun against the enemy’s gun barrel.

With a metallic scraping noise, Sf pushed the knight’s rifle down and moved forward. Her running right foot reached the ground, but her left foot stepped down on the lowered rifle’s barrel.

The knight's long rifle now had its tip sticking diagonally into the ground.

Sf used her machinegun as a cane and continued forward.

She thrust the machinegun into the ground and let go. She took a step along the knight's rifle with her left foot and swung her right leg up to climb up the rifle.

The upward swing of her right leg continued into a kick.

Her foot flew toward the knight's face. It was a straight and speedy kick.

The knight made up his mind in an instant.

He let go of the rifle.

With only the long rifle's strap still in his hand, he leaped backwards.

"!"

The knight tugged on the strap as he moved back. The rifle that had been left stabbing into the ground was powerfully pulled back even with Sf halfway through her kick atop it.

He felt a bit of resistance, but the rifle still pulled out of the ground.

"!?"

Sf had her left pivot leg on the rifle, so her footing was pulled out from under her. She began to fall backwards.

Even so, she managed to kick off the rifle and jump high into the sky behind her.

But it was too late.

The knight had already pulled the rifle back into his hands by the strap.

He narrowed the sight in on Sf as she tumbled through the air.

Just as he was about to squeeze the trigger, something happened.

Sf's body shrank down in the air and she rotated around once.

After jumping back, Sf had taken a crouching position in midair. Something was supporting her from below.

It was the machinegun she had stabbed into the ground like a cane earlier.

Sf's right foot sat atop the gunstock that was sticking up toward the sky.

In the next instant, she stretched her body out and jumped.

Her skirt flapped through the air and the bullet of light produced by the knight's rifle shot by below her feet.

Sf flew.

She swung the cooler through the air above her head and cartwheeled using it as a fulcrum.

She landed behind the knight.

The knight turned his shield toward her just as she pulled an object from the cooler and threw it at him with her back to him.

What she tossed under her arm with only a flick of the wrist was a large cylindrical object.

The knight reflexively swung his shield to strike the flying object from the side.

With a heavy yet soft sound, the shield deflected the object. It flew accurately back towards Sf.

The knight continued his rotation to aim the rifle at Sf.

As he did, he realized what the object she had thrown was.

It was a 500mL plastic drink bottle.

“Wha-…?”

The dumbfounded knight saw Sf stand up.

She was facing him. Her left hand was in the cooler. Her gaze was focused squarely on the center of the knight's wide open body.

With the sound of pieces of ice striking each other, she pulled a long metal object out of the cooler.

It was a shotgun.

Sf swung the barrel forward, using the action to cock it .

She used the reverse motion of it sliding back into place to pull the trigger.

A gunshot exploded out.

The shot first destroyed the drink bottle flying between the knight and Sf.

Immediately afterwards, it struck the knight's breastplate.

A sound of impact exploded out.

The knight flew backwards as if he had received an uppercut.

And at that moment, a voice rang out across the open area.

“Sayama-kun!”

Sf turned toward the voice and saw a large shadow.

It was the attendant she had supposedly defeated earlier. His giant form had stood up and was now charging toward her.

After she had just fired, evasive actions were asking too much of Sf.

And the attendant held a knife in his right hand. It would strike her momentarily.

“A total loss is expected,” concluded Sf expressionlessly.

Her body grew limp as she prepared for the shock.

But then an attack flew toward the charging attendant from the side.

"…!?"

It was Sayama.

From a position back and to the right of Sf, he used the momentum of the slope and all his strength to throw a reverse roundhouse kick. His heel sliced through the air in a sharp curve before striking the attendant in the side.

It sounded more like a piercing strike than a dull one.

The attendant lost his forward momentum.

However, Sayama was half-deflected and thrown through the air due to the great difference in inertia. He kept low to the ground as he landed and took a breath.

He was not looking toward Sf. He was looking toward the woods.

Shinjou stood on the slope there.

After seeing where he was looking, Sf amended her conclusion.

"Partial damage is expected."

Immediately afterwards, the charging attendant and Sf crossed paths.

The sound of fibers being torn could be heard.

Everything past Sf's right shoulder flew through the air.

With its support gone, the cooler fell to the ground.

Sayama turned around and asked, "Does it hurt?"

"No, I have no sense of pain. The only pain I feel is from being unable to remain by Itaru-sama's side."

As she replied, her right arm fell atop the dirt and rolled two or three times down the slope.

And Sf saw something else.

Behind her, the attendant was preparing for his next attack with blood spilling from his mouth.

Sf rotated around and prepared to intercept him, but then her eyes narrowed slightly.

Behind the charging attendant, the knight was aiming his long rifle her way after he had recovered due to something written by one of the priests. And behind him, the remaining magician wrote something in the air using light.

The magician was not looking at Sf and Sayama. She was looking toward the woods where Shinjou had emerged.

Sf sensed Sayama moving behind her. She moved as well. However…

"…!"

The attendant's charge, the knight's shot, and the magician's blast all came before Sf could aim the shotgun in her left hand or Sayama could take any kind of action.

The three attacks were loosed in quick succession.

Sayama saw the attack coming.

But it did not come from in front of him. It came from above. It came from above the charging attendant.

“What are you doing!?”

It was a girl.

The girl wore a lightweight white outfit and held something with a long silhouette in both hands. Her heels slammed into the attendant’s back. It was less a landing and more like a pile driver smashing the attendant into the ground.

By the time Sayama realized the girl held a long single-edged spear and a shield, he had already heard the attendant’s giant body crashing to the ground.

The attendant was struck to the ground without bouncing as if he had been hit with a hammer appropriate for his body size.

The knife he had held stabbed into the ground. It was only 15 centimeters away from Sf’s foot.

However, she had escaped any further damage. Nothing had happened to Sayama either.

What is going on? wondered Sayama, but then he recalled two other things.

Specifically, the knight and magician behind the attendant.

The knight had supposedly fired his long rifle.

That bullet of light should have destroyed everything within a 20 meter square of the point it hit, but it had never arrived.

Sayama frowned and took a closer look.

Beyond the collapsed attendant and the person who stood on his back was another silhouette.

This one was a young man.

He wore a white coat and held a giant single-edged sword in both hands.

To cover his body, he held the large white sword so the bottom of the grip was pointed up and the blade was pointed down. A bluish-white electrical discharge came from its blade.

Sayama recognized both of these newcomers.

Sf spoke to them as if to reconfirm Sayama's memory.

"You are late, Izumo-sama, Kazami-sama."

"Don't say that… But I do apologize for not making it in time to save your arm."

The one apologizing and holding a long, curving spear and shield was Kazami.

She wore the same type of white suit Shinjou had worn the night before, but her waist was wrapped in cloth. She also had a backpack that folded over.

She turned toward Sayama with the same smile she always had at school.

"Oh? You don't look too surprised."

"Of course not. After all the bizarre things you two do, this is easy to accept."

"Well, that's disappointing," said Izumo.

With his back to Sayama, he lowered the giant sword using just his right arm and glanced over his shoulder.

"Team Leviathan Primary Team, Izumo Kaku. …How's that for a cool way to name myself?"

Sayama ignored him.

Something else was bothering him: the magician's spell. It had unmistakably been fired toward Shinjou.

Is she okay? he wondered as he turned around.

He found a figure standing before the woods with her long hair waving in the wind. It was Shinjou.

But she was not alone.

Another familiar figure stood next to Shinjou. It was a tall old man wearing a white shirt, a black vest, and black

trousers. When Sayama saw him standing there empty-handed except for his black gloves, he muttered the man's name.

"The librarian of Kinugasa Library, Siegfried Zonburg …"

The man nodded, turned around, and met Sayama's gaze with his own blue eyes. His white beard moved as he spoke.

"You need to add two other titles to that: former consultant to the National Defense Department and sorcerer."

"Aren't you forgetting one!?" shouted the knight.

Everyone turned toward him. The knight vigorously swung his long rifle up toward Siegfried.

"You are the great criminal who destroyed our 1st-Gear!!"

Izumo was closest to the knight, so he reacted first.

"How about you stop that!?" he shouted while swinging his large sword horizontally.

The single-edged sword soared smoothly and easily through the air.

However, the sound it produced was not that of it striking the knight's armor.

The magician interfered.

"What!?"

The old woman used her staff as a shield to catch Izumo's blade in front of the knight.

The staff bent and then broke and she was knocked into the air.

In exchange, the knight managed to pull the trigger of his long rifle.

It produced a metallic noise and light was emitted from the book loaded into the rifle.

It fired.

Light flew in a shallow arc toward Siegfried.

It was as if it had been thrown down at him from above.

In response, Siegfried lightly swung his right hand.

Something fell down from his palm.

It was a piece of paper.

Siegfried took a step forward.

He swung his right arm up at the light shooting toward him.

That mass of power had grown to five meters across.

He casually struck it with the piece of paper in his right hand.

In the very next moment, that powerful light disappeared.

As everyone's eyes opened wide, Siegfried took another step.

"!"

He began to run.

The paper in the hand he held above his head had writing on it.

That paper that had been blank just before now had a certain destruction report written in powerful handwriting.

Sayama could not read the writing, but the images were transferred to his mind.

It was an itemized list of the dead in a certain district of a city.

Siegfried held the paper in his hand as he ran.

As he clenched it into a cylindrical shape, a blade of light appeared from it.

"…So this is the power of a grudge."

He muttered those words and moved all in the same instant.

Siegfried charged right up to the knight.

The knight aimed his rifle and fired.

However, the attack shot below Siegfried's arm.

Siegfried had moved as if about to sink down to the ground, but had instead raised the sword of light above his head and swung it down.

His strike targeted the knight's rifle.

The trajectory of the blade left an afterimage of light behind and the sound of the gun being sliced sounded like a rock splitting open.

The front of the destroyed rifle where the book was loaded slid vertically before completely falling off. Seeing that, Siegfried stood up and swung his left hand.

The knight tossed his rifle aside and took a defensive stance.

However, Siegfried's left hand was not headed toward him.

His left hand grabbed ahold of the book as it fell toward the ground.

Siegfried then held it out toward the knight and spoke.

"Do not drop this. Treat your books carefully. Even when making use of them."

Chapter 11: Her Fingers

Chapter 11

“Her Fingers”

If you draw in one who is waiting
They will become one who is hoping
Instead of merely waiting, they will be hoping

If you draw in one who is waiting

They will become one who is hoping

Instead of merely waiting, they will be hoping

The sun began to sink and the shadows of buildings and people grew slightly slanted.

The rectangular shadows of the school buildings of Takaakita Academy to the west of Tokyo were no exception.

Two deeper shadows stood in the shadow behind the 2nd year general school building on the western edge of the academy.

They were Brunhild and the black cat.

Brunhild was not keeping the black cat from speaking as it gasped for breath. It lay on its stomach and spoke quietly.

"Wow, I don't think I've ever panicked that much before. I followed my observation target and ran across a gunfight. And I certainly didn't expect them to all of a sudden target me. I shouldn't have walked there in this form."

"If you think about it, you might have become the cat with the most involvement in the history of 1st-Gear. At any rate, I'm glad you managed to escape."

"You were worried about me? Thanks."

"Yes. It would be a shame to waste the wonderful relationship we have constructed together."

"I just learned that the word 'wonderful' has more than one meaning," commented the cat with a sigh.

Brunhild said, "Now, what is this report that was so urgent you had to stop me from going to the cafeteria?"

"The Royal Palace faction surrendered. All of the hawks showed up, but they lost."

"They lost? With all of them there? Who did UCAT send out?"

"Surely you already know. Who do you think I was observing? The Royal Palace faction's terrorist attack was just a showy bonus I stumbled onto while tracking him. …He took part in the battle."

Brunhild muttered the name of their observation target as if to confirm it.

"…Siegfried Zonburg."

"Yes, but he was only a guest. He was not part of the main force."

Brunhild's expression stiffened at that. The black cat grinned and continued speaking.

"It seems this school's student council president, vice president, and treasurer are part of Team Leviathan. It looked like an automaton also took part as a guest. What will you do?"

"You have to ask? If they are our enemy, I will have to fight them if it comes to that."

The cat fell silent at that. It slowed its breathing and looked up at Brunhild.

Finally, it spoke.

"Can you do that? This may be you we're talking about, but you have no grudge against them."

"If they are our enemy, I will have no choice."

"They might pass by in the hall and greet you."

"Do you think they will simply greet me on the battlefield?" asked Brunhild and the black cat stared up at its master.

"True enough," it said with a nod after a short time. It lowered its gaze and quietly added, "But you are the type of person who still remembers the song Siegfried taught you."

Brunhild sighed, placed her hands on her hips, and tilted her head.

"I do not know what you are trying to do, but try not to trouble me too much." After thinking for a moment, she spoke to the cat that was hanging its head down. " Even if they may become my enemy on the battlefield,

Team Leviathan is still being formed, correct? Siegfried may be another matter, but there is no guarantee the others will become my enemies, right?"

"Right. The vice president had a lot of things explained to him. Team Leviathan is still not fully put together."

"Then we do not know what will happen. Unlike Siegfried who destroyed 1st-Gear, they are not yet clear combatants. I will not try to kill someone like that."

"Yes… That would be nice."

The black cat raised its head and Brunhild looked back with an expressionless look.

She remained silent and the cat commented, "Is this a wonderful relationship?"

"You shouldn't have to say it yourself, though." Brunhild brought a hand to her cheek and smiled bitterly . After a moment, she lowered that hand. "But the Royal Palace faction will likely join with the peaceful faction they originally broke off from. And UCAT will likely

recommend they do so. To set the stage for discussions with us, they need to strengthen the peaceful faction as an intermediary."

"This is getting tricky."

"Yes. But the Royal Palace faction truly is pathetic. If a battle this small is enough to satisfy them, they should have stopped fighting ages ago. They may have secretly always wanted to return to the peaceful faction."

"So they went out of the way to cause this commotion and get captured so they could align with the peaceful faction while also sticking to their principles? Is that it? But why?"

"Pride. That's why. …And that is also why I cannot mock them. The Royal Palace faction regained a small bit of what we lost when we were destroyed. We do not have even that, so we have no room to talk. Now, let's go ."

With a nod, Brunhild began walking toward the cafeteria.

To keep the cat from speaking, Brunhild gripped a blue stone in her right hand and began to write something in the air.

But she stopped when she heard a small sound.

“Chirping?” she asked.

The black cat looked around and said, “Over there.”

It was facing a line of trees in front of the 3rd year general school building.

High-pitched chirping could be heard from the ground below one of those trees.

Brunhild jogged over and saw it. A fully-fledged but still young bird was repeatedly flapping its wings fruitlessly at the bottom of the tree.

The chirping continued below the afternoon sun.

Sayama and Ooshiro sat at the rest area bench to the east of the grassy area.

Shinjou had gone to report on the situation, so she was not with them. Sayama let out a light sigh at that fact.

The scene around him was no different than it had been before the 1st-Gear attackers had arrived.

The stone wall had not crumbled and the rest area had not been destroyed. The fact that it had all happened inside a Concept Space finally hit home for Sayama.

Everywhere he looked, people were running around in all sorts of uniforms. They were UCAT workers.

After the battle, the knight and his comrades had surrendered and the Concept Space had been neutralized and released. At the same moment, UCAT vehicles had arrived through the Sakashita Gate on the east side of the Imperial Palace. The various vehicles were disguised as a delivery company, a gardener, a mover, a security company, etc.

The people who stepped out of the vehicles were dressed to match the camouflage. This led to their uniforms all being mismatched.

From what Sayama could see, the delivery company was the investigation team, the gardener was the medical

team, and the mover was the maintenance team. Unsurprisingly, the security company took care of security at the entrance to the open area.

The knight and his comrades were taken away by those in the delivery company uniform. As Sayama watched them, Ooshiro Kazuo spoke from where he sat to Sayama's left.

"They were one of the radical factions of 1st-Gear."

"You said I would be carrying out provisional negotiations with the peaceful faction tomorrow, but is the situation there just as dangerous?"

"Don't worry. The peaceful faction wishes to talk this out. However…"

"However?" repeated Sayama.

Ooshiro raised two fingers on his right hand with the passing uniformed workers behind them.

"You heard from Shinjou-kun that 1st-Gear has two Concept Cores, correct?"

"I heard they are sealed inside a sword and something called a mechanical dragon."

"Yes. The first is in the holy sword Gram which is stored in UCAT's western branch headquarters below IAI headquarters. The second…well, it is inside Fafnir Custom, the mechanical dragon belonging to the City faction. That is the largest radical group and we do not currently know where they are located. The modified mechanical dragon supposedly has separate reactors for movement and weaponry and the Concept Core is sealed within the weapons reactor. That is a very big problem."

"Fafnir, you say?"

Sayama had heard the names Gram and Fafnir before.

…They are from a European epic poem.

"That is from the Ring of the Nibelung, isn't it? My grandfather took me to an opera based on that story once . Our opinions on it were split, so we got into a fistfight once we returned home. …But why is that showing up here?"

"That is a trivial detail, so I will explain it later. At any rate, your true negotiation opponent is the radical faction possessing the other Concept Core. When that happens…"

"It would be best to have the peaceful faction act as an intermediary. Is that what the preliminary negotiations tomorrow are for?"

"Yes. Do your best not to cause any conflict. …What we want is to receive the concepts from them and activate them. A lot of them will be opposed to the idea, but in order to apologize for destroying all the other Gears, we have no intention of causing a second war."

Ooshiro raised his right thumb and Sayama ignored him.

"Now then," said Sayama. "Basically, you want me to put an end to the grudges from the past, obtain a promise to release the concepts, and prevent the world from growing too far in the negative direction? That certainly is a convenient task you are forcing onto me."

"The Leviathan Road is a series of negotiations to that end." Ooshiro then raised five fingers. "Sayama Kaoru,

your grandfather, placed five conditions on the Leviathan Road." He lowered his thumb. "First, in your research, the consenting representatives of each Gear may not disclose information on any Gear but their own. Also, any information related to the destruction of the Gears must be investigated and determined by you and those helping you. No one else may guide you."

At this point Ooshiro looked toward Sayama.

"Do you have any questions?"

"I was planning to ask all my questions after you had finished. Is that okay?"

"I can never underestimate you." Ooshiro smiled faintly and lowered his index finger. "Second, members of UCAT are forbidden from revealing or leading you to any information on the Gears or their destruction except for the information given prior to the Leviathan Road beginning and what is needed to introduce the representatives of the friendly Gears." He lowered his middle finger. "Third, any added helpers will be overlooked, but no one may be forced to help." He lowered his ring finger. "Fourth, if you choose to take action, UCAT will cooperate to the best of our ability."

Lastly, he lowered his little finger. “The negotiations with 6th-Gear and 10th-Gear are already complete, so you will focus on negotiations with the other Gears instead of repeating negotiations with those two Gears. This must be completed as quickly as possible and by any means necessary.”

After explaining all that, Ooshiro lightly spread his hands downwards and tilted his head.

“What do you think?”

Sayama nodded, brought a hand to his chin, and replied.

“Saying it too bluntly would cause some problems, so I will be more indirect: Was my grandfather an idiot?”

“Oh, nicely said. Now, how about I be a little indirect, too?” Ooshiro held his head in his hands. “That’s harsh!”

“I think I will ignore that and continue on.”

“…”

“He tells me to negotiate, but he refuses to give me any information on my opponent and wants me to feel

everything out as I go along? What does he plan to do if I make some horrible mistake out of ignorance? He can just go to hell. …Actually, I suppose he is already there."

"Calm down and listen. You will be occasionally introduced to representatives to the Gears who approve of the Leviathan Road. And what your grandfather truly wanted was for you to gain experiences rather than knowledge of the past. …Baku there in your pocket was his idea as well."

Ooshiro reached out and petted Baku's head as he spoke.

In response, Sayama said, "Before we begin talking about ideas, I still do not believe everything about this situation."

Sayama smiled bitterly when he suddenly realized he was motivated to do this despite complaining.

I am not calm, he thought. *I am still at the stage of deciding whether I will be involved or not.*

That thought calmed him down. He had not yet decided if he would accept the right passed down to him. There was a lot he did not understand and he was only at

the very first stage where he was being taught many different things. The biggest problem Sayama saw was in the phrase "by any means necessary". That meant it was already assumed lives would be taken and lost.

It was true that there was no guarantee this could be resolved by talking it out if a radical faction possessed the Concept Core.

The Leviathan Road was a negotiation to prevent the world from falling to the negative concepts and being destroyed.

That meant combat could not be taken off the table and it was worth taking some risks for. However…

…But can I do that?

He had doubts.

That was a question he could not answer just by thinking about it. And so he shook his head.

For a change of pace, he asked Ooshiro about something that had been bothering him about 1st-Gear.

"I want to hear more about what we mentioned before. During the battle, I saw the name Wotan Kingdom on the book loaded into that knight's rifle. And just now you mentioned the holy sword Gram and Fafnir. Is that-…?"

"Those names are from the epic poem 'The Song of the Nibelungs' that spread across Northern Europe and Germany and from the Volsunga Saga, the Norse legend it is based on."

This explanation came from a voice behind and to the left of Sayama. It was Siegfried.

Sayama turned around to find Siegfried standing with Izumo and Kazami on either side. They had already removed their equipment which was being stowed in a mobile okonomiyaki stand.

Sayama stared at the three of them and asked, "How can that be? Why does 1st-Gear, an alternate world, use the same words as an epic poem of our world?"

"What makes you think it originates from our world?"

That left Sayama at a loss for words. Siegfried nodded his head once and continued speaking.

"The Izumo Aviation Institute once created its National Defense Department and chose skilled researchers and test pilots. A 'sorcerer' arrived from Germany and set out to modify the ley lines. However, when the facilities meant to connect Japan to the world and bring the world's earthly energy to Japan, strange phenomena occurred in various parts of Japan."

"Strange phenomena?"

"Monsters and worlds that had become legends in various parts of the world appeared in Japan once the ley lines were connected. The alterations to the ley lines increased the connection rate with the other Gears. Concept Spaces repeatedly opened up centered on ten different locations within Japan and we would occasionally battle them. And we realized something." Siegfried took a breath. "The cultures of the ten other Gears appearing in the ten locations at which Japan's ley lines were modified greatly resembled the legends, myths, and cultures of the regions those ley lines corresponded to."

"You mean…"

It was Kazami who answered this time.

"What a pain," she said first while raising both her palms. "That's right. Ever since Low-Gear began to exist, it has crossed paths with the other Gears a few times and that has created a few connections. Low-Gear is where the other Gear's negative concepts end up, but that has given us the characteristics of all the other Gears' cultures." Kazami then walked in front of Siegfried and placed a hand on Izumo's shoulder. And, "Anyway, certain circumstances led to me becoming a member of UCAT. Differences in physical strength can be overcome in Concept Spaces after all. …Sayama, why are you getting involved in all this?"

"I do not know. I still have no reason."

"I see," said Kazami with a nod. She formed a gun with her right hand and aimed it at his forehead. "We were in that forest last night, too. I was the one that fired that last shot."

"…"

"I'm only involved as the result of a certain event and someone I know, but I've made it in this deep. If you want to rethink this, this is your last chance, Sayama. Also…"

Kazami lowered her gun hand, grabbed Izumo's hand, and began walking away.

"Eh? We're leaving already?" asked Izumo as Kazami dragged him away.

Izumo frantically waved toward Sayama and Kazami looked over her shoulder with a bitter smile. As she continued toward a UCAT vehicle disguised as a pizza food truck, that bitter smile transformed into a true smile .

As if to make doubly sure, she said, "Well, let's keep things the same as ever at school."

She then faced forward once more. With her back to Sayama, she dragged Izumo along with her and left.

After watching them leave, Sayama turned toward Siegfried.

The tall old man was also watching Kazami and Izumo leave.

Rather than Sayama or Siegfried, it was Ooshiro Kazuo who spoke next.

"She was trying to help you out there, Mikoto-kun. Kazami-kun is quite nice."

"I am having difficulty understanding why she needed to act so tough, though. Also, old man, haven't you ever heard the proverb telling the elderly not to act like they are still young?"

Sayama's manner of speaking brought a small smile to Siegfried's lips.

"Such a nostalgic way of speaking. I have not had much chance to speak with you at school, but it seems you have inherited more than enough of the Sayama personality. You really are Sayama's grandson."

"You call me his grandson, but I am actually the son of his adopted son."

That turned Siegfried's smile into a bitter one.

That bitter smile brought a sudden pressure to the left side of Sayama's chest. He quickly realized why. During the battle, Siegfried had said he was a former member of the National Defense Department.

…*He must have known my grandfather.*

For that reason, he went in a different direction with his next question to Siegfried.

"Why is the man who destroyed 1st-Gear working as a school librarian?"

"That library contains documents related to the Concept War. When UCAT makes a request, I investigate it on their behalf. Before that, I worked as a weapon tester for German UCAT, but…"

When he trailed off, Ooshiro finished for him.

"His ability was simply too great. They were unable to determine the pure ability of the weapon. And nine years ago when the previous librarian died, we had him return to Japan after so many years."

"Then will you be involved in the Leviathan Road?"

"I will only be involved in the negotiations with 1st-Gear. I cannot interfere with the others." He cast his eyes down lightly and spoke his next words more quietly . "After all, 1st-Gear was the only Gear I destroyed."

Below a tree sitting in the sun, a small bird flapped its wings against the ground.

Standing before it was Brunhild and the black cat.

The cat rushed over to the bird and frantically looked back toward Brunhild.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what should we do!? Th-this is an awful situation here! What should we do? Look at the poor thing. I-isn't there anything we can do!? Can I eat it!?"

"Was that last one what you really think?" asked Brunhild with half-lidded eyes before crouching down.

The small bird was chirping while bending its black head backwards. Black feathers ran down the center of its white chest like a necktie. The small wings striking the ground were slightly blue but mostly black.

It was small, but it had the distinct coloration of a nearly fully-grown bird. Brunhild frowned a bit as she crouched down.

"We cannot interfere with this. This is the law of nature. …Look up."

The cat and Brunhild look up. A small, dark semicircle was visible atop one of the poplar tree's branches. It was a bird's nest. However…

"No other birds are crying within the nest. The other children and the parents have left. This one likely cannot fly. Or it may be able to but cannot remember how or lacks the strength. One way or the other, it cannot fly now."

"You know a lot about this."

"Long ago, I took care of an injured bird."

"Then why not do it again?"

"I can't. …Don't give me that look. I said I can't, so I can't. It isn't happening."

"C'mon, Brunhild. You aren't making any sense. You say it's the law of nature, but you broke it before, right?"

"Shut up."

Brunhild reached out a hand to grab the black cat's tail , but the cat stepped out of the way. With the slight sound of it treading on the gravel, the cat circled around to the other side of the flapping bird.

Brunhild frowned and the small bird ceased flapping and chirping once the cat's shadow fell over it.

Brunhild held out her hand.

"Come here. I was headed to the cafeteria. I can get some food for you too."

"That's all right. I have some food right here."

Brunhild stood up and sighed.

"What are you doing?"

"This is what you meant by the law of nature, right? I'm hungry and I want to relieve myself of some stress that has been building up. …That's how it works, right?"

"Stop that," said Brunhild as she stepped forward on the gravel. The cat moved back just as far and she asked it, "What would you do if I wasn't here?"

"Capture it and eat it. Just like my instincts tell me to."

"In other words, you will have a chance unless I watch over this bird until it starves?"

She looked down. The bird stopped flapping its wings and looked up at Brunhild.

The bird then gave a quiet tweet.

"…"

Brunhild remained silent, but the ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly.

The bird moved. It lightly raised its body and showed off its flapping wings. It chirped as it looked up at her. It chirped again and again without stopping. Brunhild cast her eyes down as she heard it.

Her shoulders drooped and she sighed. She then spoke to the black cat.

"Um…Can I?"

"Sure."

"Don't say 'sure' before I even get to what I'm talking about!!"

"That may be true, but…did that help relieve some stress?"

"Yes." Brunhild's shoulders lowered, she lifted her right hand, and raised the index finger. "You know, this is a lot of responsibility. It isn't something to take on lightly."

"…You seemed amazingly carefree when you took me on as your familiar."

"Oh, shut up. Honestly," muttered Brunhild as she crouched down once more.

She held her hand out toward the small bird. The bird hesitated for a moment, but eventually struck the ground with its wings and hopped up onto her palm. It must have felt the lightly curled palm was safe because it settled down in the bottom of her palm and tweeted quietly.

Brunhild looked down at the bird and muttered, "Now I've done it…"

"Ahh ahh, you broke the law of nature! You shouldn't do that, Miss Brunhild!"

She wanted to do something, but her hand was otherwise occupied. She was forced to clench her teeth and blush.

"Wow, for the first time in my life, I feel victory! From now on, I will be the one-…whoa!!"

After kicking the cat in the rear, Brunhild turned her back on it and walked away.

The cat hurried after her.

"Where are you going?"

"The cafeteria. I need food for the bird and a cardboard box for it."

"What about food for me?"

"How about you obey the law of nature and eat a rat? I can introduce you to a nice sewer."

She ignored the displeased look on the cat's face and let out a breath. She looked at the small bird opening its beak and chirping in her hand.

"But I really shouldn't have done this. Leaving things be is the law of nature."

"Which is why you should let a natural beast like me eat it."

"Come to think of it, you aren't a natural creature at all !"

The Sakashita Gate on the eastern side of the Imperial Palace sat below the sinking afternoon sun.

Sayama and Shinjou sat atop the railing of the bridge crossing the moat. They watched the disguised transport vehicles leave through the gate.

Kazami and Izumo had already left in one of the disguised vehicles along with Siegfried.

Sf had received some simple repairs and was aboard the maintenance team's vehicle. Sayama recalled when she had expressionlessly grabbed onto Ooshiro Itaru and refused to let go when he said he would return on his own.

Sayama was waiting for Ooshiro Kazuo who was taking part in a pre-withdrawal meeting. He wanted to speak with the old man about the preliminary negotiations with 1st-Gear the following day.

He turned to Shinjou and asked, "Are you heading back after this, Shinjou-kun?"

"Yes. After getting out some like you said I should, Sayama-kun. I'll stay with you until Ooshiro-san gets here," she said.

Sayama bowed lightly and said, "Thank you."

"It's fine, it's fine. I did it again today, though. …Sorry."

"No need to apologize. There is always the help needed afterwards. Heading to the front is not the only type of ability. Isn't that right?"

"Perhaps…but did I really manage to help out afterwards?"

"Last night, you lent me your lap and taught me plenty afterwards. Today, you informed us of coming danger and you are speaking with me like this now."

Shinjou let out a heavy breath when she heard that.

"Maybe I'm not suited for this kind of thing."

"That is not true," said Sayama and recalled that he had said something similar the night before.

…It seems I end up wanting to deny her words on occasion.

He more or less understood why, but he did not pursue the thought.

Stepping in too deep would mean becoming involved with the other person.

The left side of his chest ached slightly.

He had gained that pain when he had lost his parents who had been deeply involved with him.

Sayama looked toward Shinjou.

She kept her head hanging down for a while, but finally…

"Hey." She slowly raised her head. Her partially lowered eyebrows turned his way and she tilted her head . "Why did you come here today?"

"What do you mean by that? You gave me so much information yesterday."

"But you have yet to accept the right to the Leviathan Road. After what happened yesterday, haven't you thought of getting out now to avoid any more danger?"

Sayama saw Shinjou's gaze turn toward his left arm.

"Why?"

He knew why. But could he communicate it to her by simply saying it?

That he did not know.

How very strange, muttered Sayama in his heart.

The year before in the small area that was the school, he had run for student council vice president, made speeches in front of countless students, and won. Yet now, in front of only one person…

"…"

Sayama realized he had no words to speak.

He had no idea how much time had passed since Shinjou had asked her question.

Yet when he looked toward her, she was still looking his way with the ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly.

She was waiting.

The response he gave to her expectations was a single action. Sayama suddenly placed his hand atop Shinjou's hand on the railing. Her fingers moved a bit, but she did not reject his touch.

Sayama nodded and asked, "How does my palm feel?"

Shinjou lowered her gaze somewhat.

Sayama felt her fingers move gently beneath his hand.

Her response was quiet and spoken as if it was a question.

"It is hot. And I can feel your pulse?"

"Those are the vestiges of that battle. And…"

Sayama continued in his thoughts.

…Your pulse and heat from last night were different.

Her pulse had been elevated and she had been warm, but it had been something calmer and deeper.

With that difference in mind, Sayama declared, "I want to gain something more than this."

"That battle and everything you did in it wasn't enough?"

"No. And I have to wonder…if it is really okay for me to become serious."

"Why? Why do you not want to get serious?"

Sayama looked at Shinjou. Her expression was the one of apology he had seen the night before.

While averting his gaze from her eyes without meaning to, Sayama answered.

"The surname Sayama indicates a villain. That is what my grandfather taught me… I was raised to carry out that saying. My power is dedicated to using even greater evil to crush anything I decide is evil or an enemy. But," he nodded, "I wonder if my evil is truly needed. I could become serious if I wanted to. However, I am currently too afraid of making that decision. If I remain like this, I doubt I would last long."

"You…have no self-confidence?"

Sayama fell silent at that question.

But Shinjou did not press further. She only shook her head and said something else.

“I think you could do quite well, Sayama-kun. But it is true no one can know exactly how anything will go. Ooshiro-san and the others are inviting you in. They are asking you to do this, but telling you that you might die. And you just said you are afraid of growing serious.” As she spoke quietly, Shinjou sent her words to Sayama. “In that case, maybe you should leave the Leviathan Road.”

Sayama looked at Shinjou.

Their gazes met and her fingers stiffened a bit underneath his hand.

“U-um, Sayama-kun. To be honest, watching you has been kind of scary. When I first met you, you stepped forward to fight and tried to support me. And just now…”

Sayama realized the pain in his chest had grown a bit stronger. However, he did not remove his right hand from Shinjou's hand. He felt a slightly moist warmth.

"If I fight and lose, I die. If I fight and win, I fear myself and am hated by my enemies… Is that it? But perhaps that is what UCAT wants from me."

"…Eh?"

Sayama replied to that questioning voice.

"If all of the hatred is forced onto me and then I died, the world would become a more cheerful place, right? And UCAT would remain unscathed. Am I wrong?"

Shinjou looked a bit surprised at that. But…

"Y-you can't do that! I don't want you to become someone like that!" she shouted with her eyebrows raised.

As her resounding voice passed through his body, Sayama thought.

…You are an excellent person to have around.

Shinjou then seemed to realize what exactly she had said because the ends of her eyebrows lowered, her cheeks reddened, and she looked to the side.

Sayama could not keep a smile from appearing on his lips.

At some point the pain in his chest had disappeared. While thinking how pleasant that was, he spoke.

"Well, if you told me you were going to die, I would say the same, Shinjou-kun. And your methods look like a way of killing yourself…at least to me."

"D-do they?"

"Yes. When you need to fire, you cannot. You walked out onto the battlefield unarmed to inform me of danger. Frankly, I am surprised you are not already dead."

Shinjou seemed troubled and groaned.

Shinjou thought as that groan escaped from deep within her throat, but she had not realized a certain fact.

…Why is it that the two of us are both still alive after taking part in combat twice?

No one could provide an answer for Sayama's question. However, Shinjou's groan finally returned to being a sigh.

When she turned toward him, her black eyes were staring directly at him. Her small lips opened.

"That may be true. I've thought about it before. I've wondered if I am really any use when I am only taking part in the fighting to search for my parents."

She stopped speaking there. She took some time to choose her next words.

"Sayama-kun, are you fighting in order to win?"

"Yes, my grandfather made sure of that. …He constantly told me to win back enough to make up for the losses whenever I fought. He told me to act as a villain and eliminate that which I saw as an enemy or evil."

That was his attitude when fighting.

But, thought Sayama. *That is not the same as having confidence in my ability to fight.*

When Shinjou heard his words, she muttered a quick comment.

"That's amazing," she began "I wish I could say something like that… I have no set attitude telling me how to fight like you do."

"I have no source of self-confidence to support my decisions like your search for your parents."

Hearing that, Sayama quietly muttered, "We're the opposite."

She gave a bitter smile. The ends of her eyebrows lowered and her bitter smile deepened.

"We really are the opposite," she continued. "I am always trying to find a way to not grow so strangely desperate as I wonder what I should do. I wish I was stronger so I could be more composed."

Sayama thought on Shinjou's words. After a short silence, he spoke.

"We truly are opposites, Shinjou-kun. Perhaps I should keep that in mind."

"…Eh? What do you mean?"

Shinjou tilted her head in confusion.

Without replying, Sayama moved his right hand.

He lifted Shinjou's left hand up from the bridge's railing.

Her fingers were slender and soft. Sayama wrapped his own hand around them.

For just an instant, Shinjou tried to pull her fingers back. However, Sayama lightly dug his fingers into the flesh of her palm.

"Ah…"

With that small voice, Shinjou's fingers tensed up.

But she finally left only the bare minimum of strength in those fingers, bent them, and entrusted her hand to his . She seemed to hold her hand out to him, but then slowly squeezed his hand back.

Sayama felt that small connection of power in his hand . He looked over to find Shinjou with her head hanging

down and her eyes turned upwards to face him. When their gazes met, her shoulders trembled slightly and she frantically spoke up.

"U-um? What did you mean…just now? When you said you should keep that in mind."

"It is a simple matter," said Sayama. "Your view of me is surely an alternative answer that I could never come to even if I wanted to."

"…Eh?"

"You need not think about it too deeply. Even if we are absolute opposites, it makes no difference as long as we do not worry about it. But…I simply want to remember that we each naturally hope for the opposite of the other. What do you think?"

"What do I think…? I'm not sure how to answer that."

Shinjou's expression could be seen as a smile or a troubled look, but Sayama smiled in return.

At that moment, a figure waved their way as it cut its way between the leaving disguised vehicles. It was Ooshiro Kazuo.

Sayama took a breath and looked at the watch on his left wrist. It was already nearing four.

"Ooshiro-san is calling for you," stated Shinjou as if making sure.

She climbed down from the railing.

Sayama did the same and faced her.

Shinjou looked at their clasped hands, hung her head down, and spoke toward the ground.

"Um, today…when you get back to your dorm…don't be too surprised."

"Are you sending me something?"

"Yes, sort of. …I only just made up my mind. It will probably make me worry a lot, but I feel I have to."

"I do not know what you are sending me, but I will gladly accept it."

Shinjou raised her head when she heard that. With her eyebrows lowered, her face relaxed and formed a smile.

Her narrowed eyes reflected the sun which had begun setting at some point.

As that light grew crimson, they both slowly separated their clasped hands at about the same moment.

Chapter 12: A Reunion with Someone New

Chapter 12

“A Reunion with Someone New”

A meeting is the beginning of a restriction
That is why meetings last only an instant
The eternity continuing afterwards is a choice between that restriction and a parting

A meeting is the beginning of a restriction

That is why meetings last only an instant

The eternity continuing afterwards is a choice between that restriction and a parting

A square three-story building was located on the northeastern end of the general education buildings of Takaakita Academy.

The flat building was partially made of brick and had a terrace. The front of the building also had an entrance leading to the basement. That entrance was labeled with a placard saying “Central Cafeteria Building”.

Only the basement area was open during spring break.

A wide staircase led downstairs. The placard attached to the wall there said “Open 24 Hours a Day” in thick gothic lettering. “However, only limited services are available late at night and on holidays,” it went on to say.

Down the stairs were eight large glass doors lined up side by side and a dimly lit area beyond.

The lobby contained a line of cafeteria ticket machines and several large bulletin boards.

Past the lobby was a 50 meter square space with white walls. Square pillars were located at set intervals and tables for eight filled the space between them.

However, few people were inside. The shops in the corners had sheets over them and only the area around the counter across the eastern wall was lit up.

At the tables were a few people wearing personal clothes and school uniforms as well as a few people wearing the red shirts of rugby uniforms. In addition, a girl wearing a school uniform and a black cat were standing near the counter.

The girl whose gray hair flowed back behind her was Brunhild.

Brunhild placed her hands on the counter and stared back into the kitchen.

Finally, the item she was waiting for arrived.

An old woman wearing a cooking apron carried out a cardboard box 30 cm square.

The box had a dishcloth laid out on the bottom and sitting in the corner were two flat-bottomed porcelain bowls. One contained water and the other contained dried corn that had been crushed into relatively large pieces. The small bird hopped between the two bowls.

“This is a large burden you are taking on. But it is already mostly grown, so you should not have too much trouble,” said the old woman.

Before the woman could hold out the box, Brunhild bowed and reached her own hand out.

She placed the box in her hand.

“…”

Brunhild embraced the box.

The bird looked up at her from within the box. As it tilted its small head, Brunhild smiled.

She heard the old woman say, “How nostalgic. I caught one when I was a child, too.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, yes. Even an old lady like me was once as young as you.”

Brunhild fell silent, but the black cat at her feet lightly struck her left shin with its front paw.

Brunhild used her left foot to kick the cat away below the counter.

The old woman had not noticed this exchange of blows, so she looked down at the small bird and spoke.

“It was not long after the war. I swiped some of the wheat and sake my father got through the black market. I soaked the wheat grains and place them on the ground.”

“To give them…to the bird?”

“Yes, yes. I threw one a good distance away. Once it ate that, I threw another one a bit closer to me before repeating the process. By the time it was close enough to me, it could not fly.”

"Because it was drunk?"

"Yes. But it disappeared the day after I caught it. My father looked disappointed it was gone and he complained that the bird had looked delicious. …I knocked him down with a piece of firewood afterwards."

Brunhild ignored the last half of the story and fell silent, but the black cat lightly struck her right shin once it made its way back.

She kicked it away with her right foot, looked slightly down, and glanced over at the cat.

It was looking up at her from where it lay on the floor.

But when their gazes met, the black cat cowered down and backed away.

Brunhild tilted her head and wondered if the look in her eyes had really been that harsh.

But she then sensed a presence behind her. This was why the cat had backed away.

"…!?"

She placed the box on the counter and turned around. A chest covered in a black vest lay directly in front of her eyes within arm's reach.

Surprised, she took a step back and looked up to assess the situation.

Above the black vest was the collar of a white shirt. Above that was a white beard and bald head.

Brunhild knew this man.

Before she could do anything, a voice spoke beyond the counter.

"Oh, Zonburg-san. You are late today."

Siegfried Zonburg stood beside Brunhild. He bent over his large body to place his cafeteria ticket on the opposite side of the counter.

The old woman looked at the ticket and asked, "Which one?"

"The Doria."

"Oh, the vomit rice. Now, do I have any rice left?"

"Even if that is what everyone calls it, I think the one making it should avoid that name."

"I can hardly call it Doria. I only learned how to cook from my mother."

"Doria is a household dish. There is nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Is that so?" asked the old woman with a laugh, but Siegfried's expression did not change.

Brunhild looked up at him while holding her breath.

Suddenly, he turned toward her.

Brunhild took a defensive stance at that. She brought her right hand up into the air and her left hand into her blazer pocket. All expression vanished from her face and she stared intently at him.

However, Siegfried was not looking at her.

He was looking at the box on the counter. The small bird inside looked up at him and chirped once. Siegfried returned the bird's gaze and opened his mouth to speak.

"Brunhild Schild-kun."

Brunhild gasped at having her name called.

She gulped and asked, "Why do you know my name?"

"Whenever you borrow a book, you thank the library assistant but not me. I manage the library cards, so I naturally learned your name."

"…You certainly are petty."

"No, that is simply the reason I know your name. I am not demanding you thank me. That is the decision your pride has led you to make." Siegfried looked back across the counter. "The library is open. The biology and animal section has some books on caring for animals. You should borrow one right away."

"Is that an order?"

"I merely wish the best for the bird. …But I cannot approve of caring for a bird in the same environment as a cat."

"Do not worry. My cat is loyal to me."

That comment elicited a light strike against her calf from the black cat's front paw. Brunhild swung her right heel back to kick the cat away before she grabbed the box .

Siegfried was not looking in her direction.

She took a step back to open a slight gap between them.

Siegfried provided a clear response to her silence.

He ignored her and let the silence continue.

"…"

Brunhild turned around toward the entrance.

She began walking and the black cat frantically ran after her.

She looked down into the box to find the small bird looking up at her with its head tilted.

Brunhild continued to look at the bird and did not look back.

She held her breath and quickly walked out of the cafeteria.

A line of white buildings existed to the north of the general school buildings. The buildings were aligned in a cross shape and they all looked like three-story school buildings at first.

However, the windows lined up on the southern side were smaller and more numerous than those of a school.

Through each window were two desks next to the window and a bunk bed next to the wall.

These were the student dorms.

The dorms were currently dyed in the colors of the setting sun.

A single figure could be seen moving between the crimson of the sunlight and the bluish-black shadows created by the buildings.

This was Sayama, still wearing his gray suit. He quickly made his way to the building on the southwest end of the line of dorms.

He arrived at a white walled entrance with a sign saying “Fourth General Education Dormitory – True Boys’ Dormitory”.

Sayama stopped at the entrance.

A look at his wristwatch told him the time was 5:30 PM. He had just returned after speaking with Ooshiro about the following day’s preliminary negotiations with 1st-Gear’s peaceful faction.

Sayama glanced down and saw Baku was sleeping with his head sticking out of his breast pocket. And…

“?”

Sayama suddenly turned to the east where the cafeteria building was. He had spotted some motion.

He could see a girl carrying a box toward the general school buildings.

…That is the head of the art club I passed by this morning.

She must have still had work to do.

She puts in a lot of effort, he thought as he took a breath. *I need to visit Siegfried in the library and Izumo and Kazami in the girls' dorm later.*

He then turned back toward the dorm building and looked up at his own room on the eastern end of the second floor.

In the very next moment, his expression changed. He frowned.

"…The light is on?"

As the window reflected the setting sun, he could see the bright room beyond.

He did not remember turning on the lights before leaving for the Imperial Palace during the day.

Who could it be? thought Sayama as he hurried into the dorm.

At the same moment, he heard Ooki's voice from up ahead.

"Oh, Sayama-kun."

She walked out of the exit in sandals while wearing a shirt and a tight denim skirt.

"Perfect timing."

Ooki descended the low staircase at the entrance in a single step and arrived in front of Sayama with the sound of gravel.

"What is it, Ooki-sensei? I have urgent business at present, so I would like to hurry to the scene in question."

"Heh heh heh. You always speak so formally. But you will regret it if you don't listen to what I-…wait!"

As Sayama ignored her and tried to move past her, she grabbed his sleeve.

"Could you not grab onto that? It is actually rather expensive."

"I think you should not decide what is important based on monetary value."

"It is Italian and cost 720 thousand yen."

"Wah! I'm sorry! Just so you know, I could never, ever pay for that!"

"I know. I think you should stop taking up a standard seat in front of the shop in the cafeteria building."

"But I love jam bread. It's so sad the shop is closed during spring break… Wait, please listen to what I have to say before leaving!"

This time, she grabbed Sayama's hand. He sighed, turned toward Ooki, and nodded.

"I apologize, but I fear I will catch your poverty. Please keep your Ooki germs away from me."

"If you say things like that, I won't tell you that you have a new roommate!"

"If you say things like that, it makes me want to inform you of your severe idiocy."

"Huh?" said Ooki as she thought back on what she had said.

Sayama politely removed her hand and asked, "At any rate, what is happening here? I obtained this single-person room thanks to a miracle when I had the wonderful luck of being chosen in the drawing."

"I will not ask how you influenced that miracle and wonderful luck… Anyway, that miracle and wonderful luck end today. Just give up now."

She pointed at Sayama as she spoke, but he ignored her. She immediately tugged on his hand.

"Why are you ignoring me!?"

"Well, you already told me what I need to know, right ? A parasite has arrived," said Sayama.

Ooki raised her index finger and lightly clicked her tongue.

"Listen. Let me warn you first. …Your new roommate is not used to you yet, so try not to do or say anything inappropriate."

"Have you gone completely insane, Ooki-sensei? When have I ever done or said anything inappropriate?"

"You are doing so right now in real time!"

"Now, now," said Sayama as he held out his right palm to calm down Ooki. "I understand what you are trying to say, so calm down. You want me to be perfectly polite, correct?"

"Yes," nodded Ooki before crossing her arms. "That is what I want…but with you…"

She groaned and Sayama wordlessly flicked her on the forehead with his right hand.

Sayama checked in at the reception desk, changed into his slippers, and climbed the stairs.

Baku raised his head from Sayama's breast pocket and climbed up to his shoulder. Baku must have known they were almost to the bed because he stared straight ahead from Sayama's shoulder as they rounded the turn of the staircase.

Sayama quickly finished climbing the stairs. He moved from the landing to the hallway. His room was the last room on the left.

The fluorescent lights lit the hallway more than the setting sun. Sayama could tell the door to his room was sitting open.

A few cardboard boxes were sitting at the end of the hallway next to the door. Someone was moving in.

"…"

Sayama silently walked forward.

He could hear noise within the room. Someone was opening a cardboard box and removing its contents. He could hear someone piling up clothes and stacking books . These noises reminded Sayama of the past.

…I made these exact same noises last year.

He approached.

He peered inside the dorm room through the open door.

As soon as he did, a figure took a step out of the room.

The figure had a slender and small build.

The figure stumbled forward between the boxes but managed to remain standing.

"Oh."

Inertia caused a baggy shirt and culottes-style shorts to sway. And something else swayed even more than the clothes: the soft black hair tied behind the figure's head.

The figure looked up and widened its eyes slightly.

Sayama recognized that face.

"…Shinjou-kun?" he asked.

"Ah," said the figure.

The voice was identical to Shinjou's as well.

That confused voice left Sayama thinking.

…*This is the boys' dorm.*

But his thoughts did not end there.

…If Shinjou suddenly decided she desired a life with me, what would happen?

Shinjou belonged to UCAT. This school possessed deep connections with IAI, so it was likely connected to UCAT as well.

Sayama already had Izumo and Kazami as examples. He assumed those two were deeply involved in IAI and UCAT beyond what was officially said about them.

Also, UCAT had asked him if he would accept the rights to the Leviathan Road. Shinjou's presence could be a means of leading him to accept.

What should I do? What should I do? thought Sayama twice before adding, *No, whatever the adults may be hoping to gain from this, the fact remains that Shinjou, a girl, has come here.*

He recalled what she had said on the bridge in front of the Imperial Palace. She had told him not to be too surprised when he returned to his dorm.

…That is impossible. I cannot help but be shocked at this.

When Sayama had asked her if she was sending him something, she had nodded and said she felt she had to.

How had he responded to that?

…I told her I would gladly accept it. I see.

Sayama had reached his conclusion. He had already given his answer back then.

After coming this far, he did not hesitate or make the issue any more complicated. He had decided everything should continue as she wished.

With a serious expression, Sayama nodded toward her . He spread his arms lightly to either side.

“Now, leap into my arms.”

In response, Shinjou bowed with a relieved look.

“Thank you for acting just as inappropriately as I heard you would. I am Shinjou Sadame’s younger brother, Setsu.”

Sayama's arms were still spread.

Shinjou Setsu raised his body while still smiling.

But Shinjou then said "Um…" while lowering the ends of his eyebrows and holding out his right hand.

With his arms still held out to the side, Sayama smoothly lowered his hips and rotated his body 90 degrees. He grabbed Shinjou's right hand with the right hand he still held out to the side. He gave the boy a handshake.

That touch told him Shinjou had no ring on his right hand. Sayama stood back up.

"…Her younger brother?"

"Yes," replied Shinjou with a less nervous voice and smile than before. "Didn't my sister tell you? She told me to stay here until your arm healed, Sayama-kun."

His voice and tone were identical to Shinjou's. The feel of his hand was also identical.

Sayama mentally tilted his head and let go of the boy's hand.

"How much did your sister tell you about me?"

"She said you protected her when she was almost hit by a car, but you injured your dominant arm in the process. She is busy with work, so she can't do anything to help even though she wants to."

"I see," said Sayama in acknowledgment.

…*Does he not know about UCAT?*

"I apologize in advance, but may I check on something ?"

Shinjou tilted his head in confusion.

"Sure, I don't mind. But what is it?"

"Oh, nothing much."

Sayama stood before Shinjou, slowly pulled him closer , and touched the right side of his chest with his right hand.

"Eh? Ah…Wh-what are you doing?"

As the boy provided light resistance, Sayama felt only ribs and a thin chest.

Shinjou tried to pull away from the left hand lightly wrapped around his back.

But Sayama said, “Please do not move. For one, who was it that said he did not mind?”

“B-but I didn’t think you meant this…”

Shinjou’s shoulders lowered and he stopped trying to draw away.

Sayama nodded and slid his hand over to the left side of Shinjou’s chest. He pressed his fingers in as if trying to massage his chest, but the skin beyond the white shirt was thin and hard. It had little flexibility and lacked the shape of Shinjou’s breasts Sayama had seen the night before.

…He is male.

Sayama’s body sank down slightly. He took his right hand off Shinjou’s chest and a slight moan escaped Shinjou’s lips. As if to rob Shinjou of this opportunity to

relax, Sayama grabbed Shinjou's waist with his right hand.

終わりのクロニクル

"Ah," said Shinjou as Sayama pressed his right ear against his chest.

Sayama heard the slightly quickened beating of Shinjou's heart.

It sounded the same as what he had heard the night before. The slight sweet aroma in the breath was also the same.

However, the chest he had his ear pressed up against was not the same as the chest he had seen. It was the flat and hard chest of a guy.

Still doubtful, Sayama asked, "Hm… Has your chest always been like this?"

"W-well, yes…"

Sayama looked up to see a flushed face looking down at him. Shinjou was lightly biting his lower lip and bringing together his eyebrows. Finally, he let out a trembling sigh.

"I-is that enough? Are you done? I don't want you st-staying down there too long."

Without replying, Sayama grabbed Shinjou's arm from where it hung awkwardly in the air and brought it around behind his back.

"Eh? Ah… No, Sayama-kun?"

As Shinjou lightly embraced him, Sayama listened to the boy's pulse.

But nothing changed. The chest still felt like that of a guy. The pulse grew a bit stronger, but that was it.

"I see," said Sayama with a nod before raising his head .

…She said they are twins, didn't she?

Sayama nodded once more in his heart, stood up, and faced forward.

Shinjou stood there with his cheeks red and the ends of his eyebrows lowered. Shinjou let out a breath and Sayama crossed his arms.

"Do not worry. There was nothing out of the ordinary. "

"Y-you were incredibly out of the ordinary, Sayama-kun."

"Is that any way to act toward someone you just met?"

"You should say that into a mirror…"

"No need," declared Sayama. "I was just given a warning by Ooki-sensei downstairs. And I am being careful to heed that warning."

"…I have to ask. What was this warning?"

Sayama provided a clear response.

"Do not do or say anything inappropriate."

"Wow," said Shinjou as he drew back.

Nevertheless, Sayama held out his right hand.

"It may only be until my left arm heals, but let us get along, Shinjou-kun. It should not be too difficult. Compared to those around me, I am constantly troubled by how normal I am."

In the art room at night, Brunhild gave the small bird food while working on her painting. She was adding the green of the forest to the canvas and would provide some food whenever the bird chirped to say it was hungry.

She would grab the crushed and threshed corn with narrow tweezers, soak it in water, and hold it out to the bird. If she did not lightly pinch the corn with the tweezers, the bird could not bring it into its mouth.

The black cat down at her feet spoke.

"You certainly are enthusiastic about this."

"I have to do this at least until it goes to sleep."

"I think you need to visit the headquarters tonight. What will you do?"

"It is not time for my periodic report, but yes… It would be best to ask how I should handle this from now on. If it was something simple, I could just have you fly there. But…"

The cat nodded.

"Most likely, they have already noticed the Royal Palace faction's actions. The headquarters will be full of energy trying to decide what to do."

"As long as the holy sword Gram is stored below IAI headquarters, there is nothing we can do. …Breaking in to take it is not the type of strategy Venerable Hagen prefers."

"The second generation group who know nothing of war like Fafner are oddly motivated, though."

The small bird chirped.

Brunhild fed it with the tweezers.

It swallowed the food and let out a breath. It tilted its head and looked up at Brunhild. She remained expressionless.

"…It's so cute."

"You don't have to keep that to a whisper, you know." The black cat lowered its shoulders. "But why are you so obsessed with this bird?"

"I am not obsessed. I think the laws of nature are important, but I also think life is important."

"You're contradicting yourself."

"Yes, I am."

Brunhild picked up her palette and brush. She brought the brush to somewhere other than the forest. She brought it to the area that had been empty up to this point. She brought it to the spot for the cabin and the people.

"Do you want to hear an old story?"

"Yes."

"This was long ago when I was still very young."

"How many hundreds of years ago was that? No, ah, s-sorry! Ahhh! The bottom of that brush is pointed!!"

"Shut up. At any rate, a certain person saved a town near our forest back then. A mechanical dragon had gone out of control. When the pilot was joining with it, the rejection reaction was especially strong and he went insane. The town was half destroyed and the mechanical

dragon entered the forest to pursue the people who had fled into it."

The cat said nothing and only nodded.

Brunhild continued speaking as she painted the black base for the cabin.

"This person fought despite being injured and won all on his own. I do not know if it was on a whim or what, but he took in an injured bird afterwards. We all took care of it."

The black cat looked up at the canvas. A few different people were drawn in charcoal around the cabin Brunhild was painting black.

An old man read a book within the cabin and a girl and a woman played with a bird in front of the cabin.

And a man could faintly be seen as well.

The cat looked at those line drawings before turning toward Brunhild. Lastly, it looked back at the charcoal lines of the flying bird.

"So…" The cat tilted its head. "You want to see those flapping wings once more? Something like that?"

"No," replied Brunhild with slight laugh. "This is a painting. It is not real. When our world was destroyed, that bird escaped its cage and…"

She took a breath, but did not continue speaking.

The silence spreading around her caused the cat to tremble, but Brunhild laughed quietly again.

"Ha," she breathed out before speaking in a trembling but smiling voice. "If he had been there, I think the outcome would have been different. He saved that bird despite knowing the world would be destroyed, so why did he not see it through to the end? And even if it was only for a short time, he had been with Lady Gutrune so much… So why?"

As she asked that question to no one in particular, the black cat's eyes opened wide.

"Is this person you are talking about who I think it is?"

"Yes. The sorcerer who arrived from Low-Gear. The man who stole the holy sword Gram from 1st-Gear and destroyed that earth and that sky. And the enemy who killed those who were like family to me before running away."

Brunhild spoke his name.

"Siegfried Zonburg. …Our greatest foe."

Chapter 13: Location of the Heavens

Chapter 13

“Location of the Heavens”

A gaze looking down from heaven
Is actually bound to that high place
The pleasure of doing so is a different matter

A gaze looking down from heaven

Is actually bound to that high place

The pleasure of doing so is a different matter

As night began to fall, Sayama joined Izumo and Kazami in the Kinugasa Library.

The three of them sat around a table in that library that had a stepped floor leading toward the center.

Sayama sat on the eastern side of the table. Izumo and Kazami sat across from him.

Siegfried was making black tea at the counter where he supervised the library.

Sayama wore suit pants and a shirt and had his bandaged left arm resting on the table.

He waited for the black watch on his arm to reach six o ′clock before speaking.

"Now, can you tell me the whole story about what is going on here, Kazami, Izumo?"

His sharp gaze was pointed toward Izumo who wore a black track suit over his well-built body.

"Ahh, I get the feeling an interrogation is starting here. Am I just imagining things?"

"What a coincidence, Izumo. I have that same feeling. Let us do our best to get through this together."

"I'd rather not…"

Kazami wore a sleeveless outfit and gave a half-lidded look toward the two boys.

"This doesn't really matter, so let's keep it serious and cheerful. If you don't, you'll probably receive divine punishment."

"You heard her, Izumo. Let us have a serious and cheerful interrogation."

"So basically, it's interrogation play? I know about that . At night, I'll go like this with Chisato and…"

As he spoke, Izumo began making a kneading motion with his hands in midair before suddenly disappearing from Sayama's vision.

Immediately afterwards, he heard a great sound of impact to his right.

"…"

Sayama looked to the right and found Izumo and his chair rolling below a bookcase. He rolled across the stepped floor once, twice, and thrice before coming to a stop.

He lay face down with his limbs sprawled out and did not move. After seeing that, Sayama turned toward Kazami.

She was lowering her hand to the table and was still seated.

"Hm?" she said as she noticed his gaze. She quickly reached her hand under the table and fixed her disheveled clothing. She finally looked over at her partner who was sprawled out on the floor. The ends of her eyebrows lowered, she brought a hand to her mouth, and spoke.

"Ahh, looks like the divine punishment really did come… God must have wanted Kaku to prostrate himself."

"My eyes were not quick enough to catch it, but is divine punishment limited to the area below the table?"

"Yes. As they say, 'god repays you in ways you cannot see'."

"So he endorses assassination… But I did not expect god's response to be quite so direct."

"Well, it is. So what will you do? My god is the type that wants to punch with the left after punching with the right."

"Hm." Sayama adjusted his tie. "Then I will do as your god says and take this seriously."

"Don't accept this so casually!" Izumo stood up and pointed at Kazami. "What if I had been injured!?"

"But you weren't… I have to wonder how, though," said Kazami in annoyance.

Izumo looked down at his own body and said, “Oh, that’s fine then.”

“It is?” asked Sayama and Izumo shrugged and nodded before putting his chair back and sitting down.

After seeing the two back to normal, Sayama turned toward Izumo.

“Why are you so sturdy? I have wondered that for a while now.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s just a bit of divine protection.”

“Due to that, Kaku never learns his lesson and I catch myself reacting the same way to other people.”

“Chisato was amazing the other day when a molester touched her ass on the train,” said Kaku fondly. “She put the molester on the railing next to the seats like it was a wooden horse and shoved his crotch against the metal pole like this, again and again.”

“Evil must be destroyed and molesters must die. Never forgive them even if they shout and scream. … That was the slogan for the girls’ dorm last month.”

Kazami then nodded and loudly clapped her hands.

"Okay, let's get started with the serious discussion! To get straight to the point, Kaku and I entered UCAT two years ago. The incident back then completed the Leviathan Road for 10th-Gear and 6th-Gear. My parents are both normal people who have no connection to IAI or UCAT. …What do you think?"

"I thank you for the quick and simple explanation."

"Well, there's no point in hiding any of this," said Kazami.

Siegfried spoke up from behind the counter.

"It is only appropriate that the Izumo family handled those two Gears."

"What?" asked Sayama with a tilt of the head.

With a small smile, Izumo explained, "My grandfather destroyed 6th-Gear and 10th-Gear." He then asked Sayama a question. "This will take a while to discuss. Is your roommate okay? …Do you need to go and strengthen the bonds of friendship?"

"I will show him around the school later. …He is Shinjou-kun's brother. Do you know him?"

"Oh… I have…heard a bit about him."

"He does not know about UCAT. He is taking care of his luggage at the moment, so we should have time."

"I see… Then, Chisato, bring out the world map. Let's get this over with quickly."

Kazami brought over a large map meant for a classroom. It was made of cloth and measured a meter square when spread out.

As she held onto one end and spread it out, a slight smell of wood scattered from the cloth.

A complete map of Japan which had discolored slightly with age lay on the table.

Izumo looked across it toward Sayama and opened his mouth to speak without a smile.

"It's actually been a while since I've heard anything related to the National Defense Department other than about my grandfather. UCAT stores all of that sort of information in their archive and won't let in anyone who doesn't have permission. I did learn that old man Siegfried is a former member of the National Defense Department during the trouble a few years back."

Sayama realized Izumo's gaze was slowly moving up behind him.

Sayama turned his head around to find Siegfried standing there with a silver-plated tray.

The aroma of tea wafted from the four cups sitting on it.

"I would like to open a café, but I cannot do so right away."

Kazami took the saucer and cup held out to her.

"They have tea in Germany, too. I drank quite a bit when I was there on a trip a long time ago."

"Eh?" Izumo frowned as he took his cup. "Wh-when did you become such an international person?"

"It was before I met you, Kaku. I ended up all over the place thanks to my father's job during my middle school years. It was my experiences then that taught me how to speak English. …Do you really have to give me that look ? Sayama is even more of a threat. If I recall, he knows 12 -…"

"I know 13 languages. My grandfather drove it all into me, so you cannot say it was my own ability." Sayama took his cup and looked up at Siegfried. "Although that same grandfather told me nothing about himself or you."

"That is unsurprising. I believe Izumo and Kazami only just learned I destroyed 1st-Gear today."

"You're right about that. Anyway, how much will you be helping us?"

"I tell you the bare minimum of what I remember. And I will correct your knowledge."

Kazami gave a short whistle at that. Siegfried frowned when he heard it, but she rid him of the frown with a single embarrassed smile.

She lowered her cup and said, “That sounds good to me. The two of us have been with UCAT for about two years, but we haven’t been given much information. And yet Kaku is the heir to IAI. Not to mention that the last time his father came to visit him was-…”

“Chisato.”

Kazami stopped speaking when her name was called.

“Sorry,” she said.

Izumo nodded and so did Sayama.

“He does behave badly,” commented Sayama. “Even parents have their own feelings about things.”

“I’m not sure if I should stand up for him or not…”

“Let’s just leave it at that,” said Izumo as he placed a hand on the map. “You heard about the Divine States-World Interaction at the Imperial Palace, right?

Japan is connected to the world and that condition has continued to this day. After the ten Gears were destroyed and Japan lost World War Two, Japan escaped occupation by slowing the ley line acceleration and taking on the strange phenomena of the world."

Izumo looked over at Siegfried. The old man merely nodded.

Sayama decided Izumo's information must be accurate . It would be safe to let him take the role of teacher.

"Continue. What I want first is a list of the ten Gears. At the Imperial Palace, you said they influenced the myths, legends, and cultures of this world. And 1st-Gear is…"

"The Volsunga Saga of Norse mythology and the more well-known 'The Song of the Nibelungs'. It's the story of a hero defeating a dragon and then losing his life after being betrayed by his wife and old lover. The name Siegfried even appears as the hero," said Izumo with a nod. He tapped between Japan's Kinki and Sanin Region on the map. "At any rate, that's 1st-Gear. You know where 1st-Gear's Concept Core is, right?"

"Yes. Half of it is inside the holy sword Gram and kept in UCAT's western branch underneath IAI headquarters. But the other half is inside Fafnir Custom, the mechanical dragon of a radical faction." Sayama lightly folded his arms. "A mechanical dragon… Have you ever seen one, Izumo?"

"Once, but it wasn't Fafnir Custom. Simply put, it's a dragon-shaped machine. The main body alone is over 30 meters long. I hear there are some amazing ones that can fly."

"They were the most powerful standalone weapons of the Concept War," said Siegfried. "As Ooshiro explained, the Fafnir I slew with Gram had only one reactor. Destroying that one killed it. However, the modified version has two reactors and the crucial Concept Core is sealed inside the weaponry reactor at its throat. If it comes to a fight, destroying the weaponry reactor will not be enough."

"Fafnir Custom would still be running, so it could crush us?"

"A mechanical dragon can fight effectively enough with just its gigantic body."

Sayama nodded at Siegfried's explanation.

…If I accept the Leviathan Road, will it mean taking on that thing?

He grinned bitterly. He recalled what Shinjou Sadame had said that evening: you might die.

She might very well have been right, but for the moment, Sayama needed to gather information. He brought a hand to his chin.

"Next, I would like to ask about 2nd-Gear."

"Oh, 2nd is easy. It's Japan." Izumo raised his hand and pointed toward the seven Izu Islands on Sayama's side of the map. "That Gear is thought to be the basis for the Kojiki and the Nihon Shoki. Its Concept Core is apparently a fire dragon called Yamata. The people of 2nd-Gear have mostly acclimated to life here. Negotiations with them should be easy."

Izumo moved his outstretched arm to the side, pointing toward the Seto Inland Sea.

"3rd-Gear is the basis of Greek mythology. I don't know much about its Concept Core. …It's been split in half and one half is carried by something called Typhon. And…"

"And? What is it?"

"Have you seen the large humanoid machines we call Gods of War? You have, right? 3rd-Gear is a world of those and automata. That's why I think this Typhon must be a God of War. The problem is that we can't find the other half. Searching for it will probably be left to us. If you accept the Leviathan Road, that is," said Izumo before adding, "Another problem is that we might have to fight those Gods of War."

Sayama had seen it the night before in UCAT's underground hangar. He had seen a metal giant over eight meters tall.

…First the mechanical dragons and now this. It's all so showy.

He now further understood why he might die.

"What about 4th-Gear?"

As Sayama asked for further information regardless of the danger, Izumo gave a bitter smile. He pointed toward Kyushu.

"Africa. From what I hear, the Concept Core was made into the model of the tree serpent Mukiti and it is in UCAT's possession. …And 5th-Gear is the Americas." He pointed toward Hokkaido. "I've heard 5th-Gear is the Gear of mechanical dragons. Half of the Concept Core was apparently turned into some amazing weapon which is stored in UCAT, but the location of the other half is unknown."

"6th-Gear is already taken care of, correct?"

"Yes. That world is the basis for Indian mythology. That Gear was ruled using a dragon named Vritra. If you see any Indian people in UCAT, you can assume they're from 6th-Gear."

While still smiling, Izumo slowly moved his hand over to point at Tohoku.

"I've been told 7th-Gear is China, but we don't know anything about its Concept Core."

"This is a lot to investigate…"

"Think of that as part of your duty. Next, 8th-Gear is Australia. That's Shikoku on the map. Its Concept Core is held by the stone serpent Wanambi, but it is kept in the UCAT western branch below IAI headquarters."

"We have a surprising number of them stored to the west."

"Yes," said Kazami as she stood up and pointed at the Chugoku region for Germany, the Seto Inland Sea for Greece, Shikoku for Australia, and Kyushu for Africa. " All of these were focused in the west. It seems they decided it would be useful to have them nearby in case of an emergency. Was that actually the reason, old man Siegfried?"

"It was, but it also grew difficult to move them afterwards. The remnants of the different Gears would plot to steal each other's Concept Cores."

"So the fighting continued even after the war ended. I suppose that should not surprise me. …Next, what about 9th-Gear?"

"9th is the Middle East. It has been suggested as the basis for Zoroastrian mythology. It seems they had some gigantic mechanical dragon named Zahhak, but 9th-Gear lost and its Concept Core is stored below UCAT. 10th is last, but it's already been dealt with."

"Tell me anyway."

"Okay," said Izumo as he pointed above Kinki. " 10th-Gear is thought to be the basis for Norse mythology separate from 1st-Gear. 1st-Gear is less about the legends of the gods and more the basis of the folklore and myths. 10th-Gear is directly the world of the gods."

"I see," nodded Sayama.

That was the legends of 10 different locations in the world and the corresponding Gears. And…

"You may not know about 7th-Gear, but are all the Concept Cores related to dragons?"

"Yes. And they are also often contained within weapons. In almost every case where the Concept Core has been split in half, one is in a dragon and the other in a weapon."

Sayama thought on that.

…So it is the dragon and the weapon to defeat it.

Power and restraint, wealth and influence, enemy and hero. It was a primitive symbol of that relationship.

"So it is called the Leviathan Road because it involves dealing with the dragons of the ten Gears."

"And Leviathan also refers to the devil's dragon in the biblical book of Revelation, right?" added Kazami. "I know a bit about it since my father is looking into that kind of thing right now for some event planning. The Leviathan has the appearance of all beasts."

"That's what's wanted from us." Izumo folded his arms. "This is just a guess of mine, but I think the Leviathan Road is a negotiation in which we confront the dragons of the ten Gears after acquiring the weapons needed to defeat them."

Sayama began to nod at what Izumo had said, but then stopped.

There was a lot he still did not know. It was too soon to accept that deduction.

…And something bothers me about that explanation of the Gears.

He got the feeling Izumo and Kazami's explanation had contained no conscious errors. They had been clear about what they understood and what they did not.

However, Sayama still felt something crucial was missing. But what was the problem?

"Hm…"

Sayama crossed his arms and stared at the map of Japan. And then…

"?"

The arms folded in front of his chest felt a small movement in his shirt's breast pocket.

It was Baku. He must have woken up from sleeping in the pocket because he looked up at Sayama.

"Wah," said Kazami with a look that plainly said she wanted to touch Baku, but Sayama ignored her. He stroked Baku's head and told him to stay put.

It was as Baku nodded and sank back into the pocket that Sayama realized what it was that had been bothering him.

In the dream Baku had given him that morning, he had seen some ruins.

He immediately gave voice to his thoughts.

"Babel. Izumo, do you know of a tower named Babel?"

Izumo looked up and exchanged a look with Kazami.

"Now that's a surprise. We don't know anything about it besides the name. How do you know about it?"

"Baku here gave me a dream with a giant tower in it. Where is it on this map?"

Izumo and Kazami exchanged another glance at that question.

From the way the ends of their eyebrows moved slightly, Sayama could guess the answer.

"You don't know?"

"No. Since it's called Babel, we know it's most likely located in Japan's version of the Middle East near Osaka. And…Babel must be related to Low-Gear's biblical mythology."

"You sound very certain for saying you don't know," said Sayama. "Are you saying this is a mythology of Low-Gear that has no influence from the other Gears?"

"Yes. Biblical mythology is thought to be a Low-Gear original."

Izumo smiled bitterly and pointed toward the bookshelf behind him. It contained Kinugasa Tenkyou's books that Sayama had looked at that morning.

"Do you remember the books you looked at this morning? The 11 books on mythology. Volumes one through ten correspond to the lineup of Gears we told you about. And do you know what the eleventh volume is about?"

"…The bible?"

"That's right. Japan possesses the appearance of the world's ley lines. I don't know if Babel in Japan influences the Middle East or if the Middle East influences the Osaka region, but that tower definitely exists."

"Do you really not know any details concerning Babel?"

"We tried to look into it, but the information has been completely shut down. Of course, that almost tells you it exists right there. We have no idea why it is being kept secret when it is related to our Gear," explained Kazami with a shrug.

Sayama gave a bitter smile.

I see, he said in his heart. *These two have seen the mysteries in their situation and have investigated some of them over the past two years.*

Something else seemed to click in place in his head.

"Is that why UCAT uses some terms related to the bible? Like saying 'testament' for 'understood'. Testament can also refer to the bible."

"Yes. There are a total of 11 different Gears: Low-Gear with the bible and the other ten that act as models for different mythologies. Your grandfather and the others from the National Defense Department destroyed all of the others."

"But this is referred to as Low-Gear. Why does it have such a humble name?"

Siegfried nodded in response.

"The other Gears referred to each other by numbers based on the order of their worlds' string vibration frequencies. Those codenames were created as the Concept War continued. And so we came up with our own. American UCAT suggested naming ourselves Law-Gear because we fought for victory and justice. But …"

"But?"

"Professor Tenkyou misspelled it when making the announcement. We have been Low-Gear ever since."

"Am I supposed to laugh at that?" said Sayama with a sigh. He then took in a breath before asking, "At any rate, which of these Gears did my grandfather destroy?"

Siegfried said nothing, but he cast his eyes down.

Seeing that brought a pain to Sayama's chest. He frowned and sucked in a breath.

Izumo must have noticed this change because he frowned. Kazami spoke from beside him.

"Sayama? Are you-…?"

The two of them were aware of his illness. That was why Kazami stood up from her chair and began to approach him. At the same moment, the entrance to Kinugasa Library opened behind him.

"Um, is Sayama-kun here?" asked a high-pitched voice .

"…"

Sayama raised his lowered head and turned toward the library entrance beyond Siegfried.

Shinjou Setsu stood there in personal clothes. Shinjou's hair was worn up and it swayed as he looked toward Sayama.

His eyes were wide as he looked through the library and they narrowed once he spotted Sayama.

"Are you done with your work?"

Sayama nodded and realized a certain fact.

…My chest pain is gone?

He did not know why. However, it was clear that Shinjou's presence had played a role.

Sayama smiled bitterly in his heart as he wondered why.

He stood up and looked over at Izumo and Kazami. A smile appeared on Kazami's lips.

"Go on. I hope you can take good care of your first roommate."

Sayama listened to Kazami's words and nodded. He walked over toward Shinjou who was tilting his head with a smile.

In the unlit art room, Brunhild stopped her hand that was moving the brush.

Her wristwatch told her it was 7:30 PM.

"I have been focusing on this for quite a while."

She looked to the side. The small bird was sleeping in the cardboard box placed on the work desk. The dish cloth inside the box was crumpled such that a depression existed in the middle like a nest. The bird stood on the brush placed there in place of a perch. Its eyes were cast down in sleep.

As Brunhild watched the bird, she swung a leg. This produced a voice at her feet.

"Ow. What is it? I had just gotten to sleep."

She heard the black cat's footsteps on the floor. Looking down, she saw its slender body standing up and looking up at her.

Brunhild pressed her index finger against her mouth.

"Are you trying to pick your nose?" asked the cat.

She gently kicked the cat through the air.

The cat turned its back to her, rolled over, and began complaining, but Brunhild ignored it. She stood up and checked the food and water in the box. She soaked a few pieces of food in the water and left them for the bird.

She then crouched down, grabbed the back of the cat's neck, and picked it up.

"Now, let's go to the headquarters."

"Ah? What about the bird? Is it okay?"

"It's sleeping, so this is our chance."

Brunhild lowered the black cat to the floor and walked toward the lockers. They were the lockers for the art club

located in the back of the room. As she walked, she loosened her uniform's tie and removed her coat.

She draped the coat over her arm as she arrived in front of one of the lockers. She touched the door and it opened.

"Sorry, Requiem Sense. The time to use you has not yet arrived."

The giant scythe folded up in the locker called orbs of light into the surrounding area. As she watched that pale firefly-colored light, Brunhild grabbed some folded up cloth from the bottom of the locker.

As she lifted it up and spread it out with one hand, the black cat spoke its name.

"The black clothes of the witch."

Hanging down from her hand were a black dress and a black three-cornered hat.

As Brunhild drew the black clothes toward her, she tossed her coat into the locker.

Her empty hand ran through practiced motions. Her uniform's skirt fell from her waist and to the floor, she unbuttoned her shirt, and she slid her body out of it.

Partway through, her hand got caught on the right cuff of the shirt, but she bit the button to remove it.

She was now wearing only black underwear and stockings.

She then lightly waved the black clothes again to spread them out.

These black clothes had no stitches along the collar or chest. She sucked in a breath to make her body as slender as possible and slipped the hem of the skirt down her body. She breathed out and the three-dimensional form created by the darts below the chest and the tucks at the waist fit perfectly to the shape of her body with no need for a belt.

Brunhild pulled a pendant with a blue stone embedded in it from the dress's breast pocket and placed it around her neck.

She lifted the three-cornered hat up in both hands and placed it on her head.

"Finished."

Without even checking in a mirror, Brunhild began to move. She grabbed the shirt and skirt at her feet and threw them into the locker without bothering to fold them.

"Ah."

The shirt got caught on Requiem Sense, so she frantically removed it.

She blushed and looked down. The black cat looking up at her quickly shook its head.

"I-I wasn't thinking anything! I wasn't laughing! I wasn't thinking 'you fool' or 'you ape'!"

終わりのクロニクル

"Fine then," she said quietly.

She shut the locker and the pale light floating around the area disappeared.

She glanced around to make sure no light remained. Afterwards, Brunhild looked over at the cleaning supplies locker three to the left.

She walked over, opened the wooden door, and pulled out a broom. It was a meter and a half long and meant to be used in both hands. The brush portion had a plastic cover with a floral pattern.

Brunhild spun it around in one hand to ensure the bristles had not come loose from the shaft.

"I hope this will be okay. During the major cleaning, a first year was pretending to play heavy metal on this."

"And who was it that knocked him out by suddenly chopping him in the medulla oblongata with her hand?"

"I-I just panicked a little. I couldn't think of any other way."

"Your form was excellent for it being a split-second idea."

"Shut up. Anyway, we need to hurry there and hurry back."

Brunhild began walking and the cat sighed before following.

She unlocked the art room door and stepped out into the hallway. She then walked to the staircase. Their destination was the rooftop.

Once they reached the rooftop, the wind and moon showed themselves.

Brunhild looked up at the bluish-white glowing moon and frowned.

"This makes it more difficult. I'll be seen if I fly."

She looked down at herself to find her black clothing reflecting the moonlight, coloring her a bit blue.

The shadows of the broom and three-cornered hat on the rooftop were bluish black as well.

After puffing air out of her nose, Brunhild pulled a small pouch out of her vest pocket. It was leather and rectangular. The folded upper corner was the only portion made to open.

The black cat's tail stuck up and trembled when it saw the pouch.

"I'm afraid of your driving enough already… Are you really using that too?"

"Come on. If I took off with my own power, the noise and light would give me away."

"Low-Gear really is inconvenient…" said the cat as it hung its head down.

"Yes," was the only response she gave before opening the pouch and tilting it downwards.

Sand spilled out.

Brunhild began to walk. She moved toward the western edge of the rooftop. She held the broom in her left hand and lightly shook the pouch of sand in her right hand.

Suddenly, she began to hum. She hummed the melody line of the hymn Silent Night.

The sand that glowed white in the moonlight fell to the rooftop amid the wind and seemed to mix together with the music in her breaths.

Despite the blowing wind, the sand fell straight down without scattering. The path Brunhild walked along and the way she moved her hand drew out a single pattern.

This pattern was a written character. This single 1st-Gear character measured a meter square.

From the center of the roof to the western edge, she lined up 40 of the same character and then lined up 20 of a different character.

After she had finished writing the 60 characters, Brunhild lightly shook the pouch next to her ear. She nodded in satisfaction at how much was left and put the pouch away in her pocket.

She then returned to the black cat who had not moved. She stood atop the first character and faced the western sky.

"Now, let's go."

Brunhild pulled a single blue stone from her pocket. The stone had a thin chain attached to the front. She wrapped that chain around the middle of the broom.

She placed the broom's brush on the ground and placed her right foot atop the joint between handle and brush. She moved the right hand holding the handle forward. This created a reverse triangle between the broom and her own body.

She carelessly grabbed the neck of the black cat at her feet and tossed it onto the front of the broom.

"Not the froooooonnnnnnt!"

"Shut up," said Brunhild as she took a light step with the left foot that was still on the floor.

The first character was located there.

In the instant the sound of her step rang out, a change came over all 60 characters.

The change came in the form of pale light and movement. The sand of the first 40 characters gave off a slight blue light and the sand of the 20 characters after them gave off an orange light. The sheet of all 60 characters began to move with the 20 characters in the lead.

Starting below Brunhild's feet, the 60 meter long sheet created from the 60 characters created a shallow slope leading up into the sky.

After approximately 30 seconds, a slope of characters had been created with the very end raised by three meters.

This shallow slope could not be seen without ascending to the roof of one of the other school buildings.

A wind blew in from the east as if to wash across the backs of the characters.

Brunhild then stepped on the character on the floor beneath her feet once more.

It all happened in an instant.

The character beneath her feet produced a wind. This wind did not blow; it pushed.

"!"

A wind that had the mass of a wall pushed at her feet and her back. It started her, the broom, and the cat along the slope.

She picked up speed. Brunhild first felt the thickness of the atmosphere. She then felt the speed.

As her body sank down on the broom, she could see the scenery ahead and the line of characters shooting by at high speed below her feet. Once she passed a character , it would lose its light, return to being sand, and scatter across the floor.

In the period of time known as an instant, the first 40 characters scattered.

When Brunhild reached the remaining 20 orange characters, her body began to float.

She began to accelerate further in a straight line.

The wind pushing her from behind began also pushing diagonally at her back and from below her butt.

When Brunhild saw the end of the slope and the starry western sky beyond, she lowered her body on the broom even further. She clung to the broom with her entire body.

Before she could even take a breath, all of the characters on the floor scattered and Brunhild shot into the sky.

A roaring noise struck her body.

"!"

She was in empty air.

Nothing was supporting her body. For an instant, that was all she could comprehend.

Her five senses were disappearing after being struck by inertia.

However, all of her senses returned soon thereafter. She felt the cold nighttime wind tickling from the front of her neck to the back.

"…Ah."

When her slightly darkened vision recovered, she noticed a line of private homes running along below her.

The broom moved at high speed and it was falling as if scraping away at her gut. Brunhild was clinging to the broom's handle with her entire body and the broom was shaking violently to the left and right with no sign of settling down.

Brunhild raised her head. She checked to make sure a pale bluish-white light was coming from within the floral pattern cover over the broom's brush. She then released the cat from where she had been pressing it to the handle with her left hand.

As she flew through the wind, the sea of light flowing by below her was approaching. It only took her an instant to decide what to do.

She needed to rise. And to do that…

"Continue in flight form."

Brunhild squeezed the stone wrapped around the broom and used a leg to push the brush toward the ground.

By the principle of leverage, the end of the broom pointed toward the sky.

That was the start.

As if in response, the floral pattern cover over the brush began producing its own driving force.

The brush portion emitted light downwards toward the ground.

Light shot from the left, right, and top of the tip of the handle. That light transformed into small fixed-position wings that looked like bird wings.

With thrust, wings, and an upward orientation, the broom would be sent up into the sky.

The night scenery flying by below was continuing to approach, but Brunhild ignored that visible cityscape.

“Here we go!!”

The light coming from the bottom of the broom suddenly exploded.

A solid sound burst out.

The tip of the broom produced a ring of steam and it was given permission to accelerate up into the sky.

With a roar similar to artillery fire, it shot straight up toward the heavens.

Brunhild flew.

By the time she felt the recoil, she was already much higher in the sky.

The broom continued to rise. However…

“…”

Brunhild silently observed the sea of light spreading out below her.

That was Tokyo.

But Brunhild let a bitter laugh out into the wind and looked up toward the heavens. She looked into the starry western sky. The moon was not visible that high in the sky.

She squeezed the stone in her right hand and accelerated further. She put all of her speed into ascending and moving to the west.

She flew. She rose up into the night sky. Every feeling in her body urged her to curve through the sky and continue west. The feeling of being thrown out into the sky brought joy to Brunhild. And so she added even more speed.

The cat was shouting something, but it fell silent when she replied with a smile.

She moved onward and upward.

As she shot by just below the clouds, she refused to let up or stop her speed until she reached her desired altitude.

Afterword

Sorry, I only just finished proofreading, so I'm a little excited. For those who are here for the first time: welcome. For those military commanders who are saying "First time? More like my second or third time. Mwa ha ha!": go sit down over there and stick out your head. For everyone else: Nothing has changed here. Welcome back.

When you get down to it, I've been writing the City series for the entire six years since I won the Dengeki Game Novel Prize, but now I have my first new series (does that make any sense?).

This time, I suppose you could call it a fairy tale taking place in modern times. Some of the geographic issues and a few of the phenomena are completely fictional, so please be understanding.

Anyway, I have the plot complete up to the very end, so I hope it will live up to your expectations as much as possible. Of course, hoping is easy, so I can hope for anything I want (ha ha).

Please continue reading the coming books as well.

Anyway, 2005 is 60 years after World War Two. I first thought up this story during the 80s and I initially thought of it as the story of two generations: a parent and child. However, this really isn't the era for that kind of story…

I looked into a lot of things and found out my grandfather on my mother's side worked building battleships at Nittetsu's Akashi factory which was almost hit in an air-raid. Whenever you come across stories like that it makes history feel so close by.

At any rate, I had a bit of a chat with a friend while looking into that kind of thing.

"Hey, so what did you think of my new series?"

"Well, let's see… I thought there was a rule saying your heroines had to be blonde with huge breasts."

"What kind of rule is that, you Titty Prefecture resident? And is that really your first comment?"

"But it's always been that way. Just take a look at your criminal record. Out of 15 novels, the blonde rate was 11 /15 and the obviously huge breast rate was 4/15. That's

a total batting average of 5.00. Not even major leaguers are that high."

"Your Honor! I believe there is sophistry in that calculation! May I call him a rotten bastard!?"

"Quiet down. I am justice. Too bad for you."

"That's the first time I've ever been told 'too bad' by justice…"

"Bear with it. Anyway, you went with a black-haired heroine this time, hm? It looks like the accused is showing remorse for his past deeds. As such, I judge you innocent and sentence you to death."

"You're horrible. And are we really going with this from the very first afterword of the new series?"

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, how have you been lately? Have you been chasing after any cats?"

"No. I'm not 'I', so I don't chase after them. A black cat comes and goes from the yard of a half-deserted house in my neighborhood. It seems to be someone's pet, but I recently learned that there are two of them. When I approach, one rolls over to show me its belly and the

other hisses at me. It's an obvious example of seduction versus anger."

"Sounds like twin sisters from some sort of game. The standard method is to have the hissing girl not actually hate you either."

"For not actually hating me, the look in that cat's eyes sure was serious."

"Do your best. If you can shout 'It doesn't hurt! It doesn't hurt!' while it bites you, any animal will grow attached to you."

"Did you mix a lot of jokes into that?"

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, according to the Divine States-World Interaction Theory, the area around my family home is Morocco."

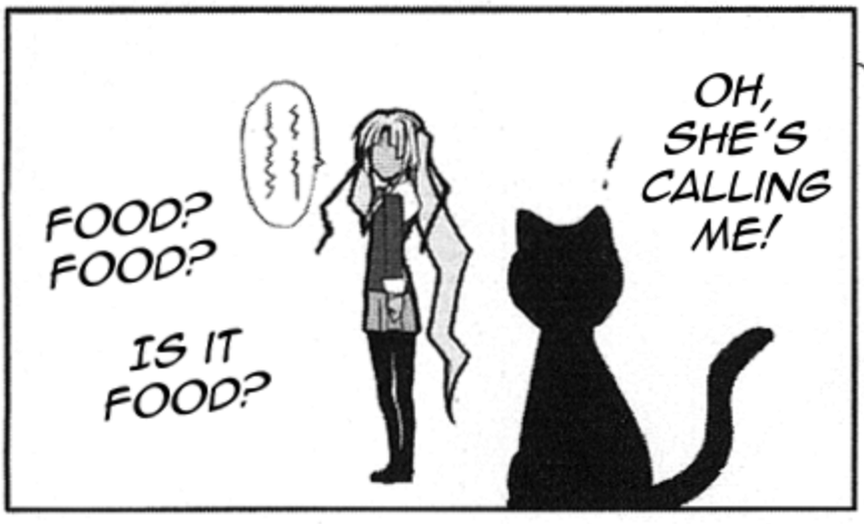
"Oh, what's wrong with Morocco? Don't worry about being in Morocco. From now on, I'll call you Morocco. And how about I add 'detective' to that? Hm? What do you think, Detective Morocco? I can call you Moroc for short."

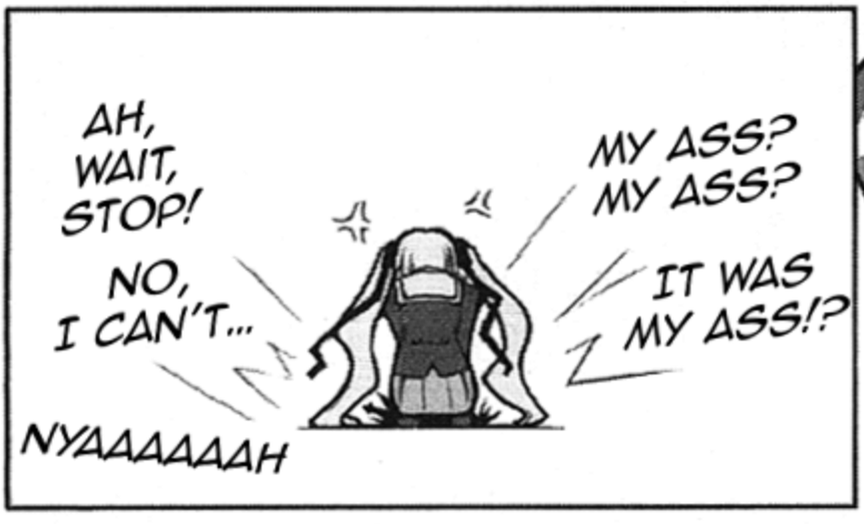
Afterword

Omake Theatre

(Tentative Title)

Satoyasu.





"You will definitely die in some horrible way."

I would say the same about him, but what do you think?

Well, it should be something like this every time, so you can look forward to that.

I just finished proofreading while listening to the background music I used while writing this novel. Namely, Jinnouchi Taizou's "Boku wa Nanika wo Ushinaisou da". (I cry every time I hear it.)

"Who exactly will begin it?"

It gives me that sort of thought once more.

At any rate, Part B will be out before long. Just wait a bit longer.

March 2003. An early morning of allergies.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. ↑ In Japan, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (1945–1952), which occupied Japan after World War II.
2. ↑ The most prominent example of her use of male language is using “boku” to refer to herself.
3. ↑ Requiem Sense is German for Requiem Scythe